

Simple Gifts

by Ecoutez

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Summary: Two years after HTTYD 1 (but 3 years before HTTYD 2, because math) Hiccup and Astrid are noticing each other on a more intimate level, and begin leaving gifts for one another in secret.

1. Chapter 1: Softening Surprises

****Softening Surprises****

Hiccup knew learning to be Chief would be difficult. Not because he couldn't think of solutions or figure out problems to the benefit of both sides of an argument. He could do that. He could invent things, add to the defenses of the island with new plans, and manage the diplomatic intricacies of dragon-dragon conflict, and dragon-viking conflict. And viking-viking conflict, probably the hardest of all.

The problem was the people.

Not that individually he didn't love the people of Berk, and the village itself. He loved his home, now that he felt like he belonged in it.

But dealing with people all day, different problems, different noises, different voices in his ears, all brought to his window at the forge, dropped in his lap at mealtimes, following him home at night—it wore him out. He knew how he was supposed to do his job, all of his jobs, and he knew he was capable.

But there came a time each afternoon when he felt—hollow. Like a fire burnt down to one weak ember. Each moment with people took a piece from him, until he felt himself growing dark and tired inside. So Hiccup would go find some silence.

Silence was scarce in Berk. He could fly away with Toothless for an hour or so, but he felt the needs of the village follow him. He felt

their welcome when he flew back, and watched as they met him with smiles and eager unasked questions. He loved his neighbors; he loved his village. But he hated feeling depleted at the end of every day.

Hiccup couldn't bring himself to be rude to anyone, though. He didn't actually dislike anyone who asked him for help or for an ear to listen to a problem. He wished he knew what was wrong with him, that each person took something small but vital away from him.

Hiccup knew he had only a few minutes of silence before someone knocked on the door, and he tried not to feel angry as he sat on the side of his bed, rubbing his neck, then his eyes. A few minutes were better than nothing.

He lifted his legs onto the bed, and slowly removed the straps holding his prosthesis in place. Taking it off, despite how it made him feel vulnerable, also made him feel at rest. He wasn't going anywhere, not quickly anyway, if he took it off and laid down. It meant he had to stop. It meant rest. Peace. Quiet. For as long as he had.

He shifted onto the bed, pushed the covers back, and slowly stretched out.

The minute his head hit the pillow, he jerked up.

That wasn't his pillow. It was...new. Softer. Thicker.

He looked at it, then, carefully, lifting one corner with two fingertips, he peeked under it. He wouldn't put it past the twins to booby trap his bed.

But there was no sign of any note, or indication of how it got there. No imminent explosions of jam or, worse, something foul from the stables. It was just a pillow.

Maybe his father had bought it? He'd have mentioned something. Maybe he got new pillows for both of them? Hiccup could go downstairs and look at his father's immense bed, but he didn't feel like it. He wanted to rest, not solve one more curiosity.

The pillow was nice. It didn't explode, or seem like it would, and it was cool and soft beneath his head. He laid back down, and closed his eyes.

In minutes, he was asleep.

2. Chapter 2: Sewing With Axes

****Sewing With Axes****

Earlier that same week...

* * *

><p>Astrid hated sewing.<p>

Well, that wasn't entirely correct. She liked making things, but she

disliked that she was so used to using her hands to break something apart in battle, making something out of something else seemed so difficult. Maybe sewing hated Astrid. It certainly wasn't easy.

But, like all of Berk, she'd learned to try different things, to ask, 'What would happen ifâ€¦' and then set out in search of the answer.

She'd never tell anyone, but in moments of great sewing frustration, when the thread tangled into an impossible knot for the twentieth time, when she realized she'd made a mistake, her progress had gone in the wrong direction and she had to tear her work apart to start over, she'd think, "If Hiccup can train a dragonâ€¦".

If he could do that, and he had, then whatever small task that faced her clumsy fingers, she could do it. She'd try. It couldn't be harder than what he'd done.

So, for the fourth time that week, she ripped out her stitches and started over.

Not that she didn't curse about it. Astrid was very creative at cursing. Her mistakes had been called a half-sow, troll-eating sheep's ass, a festering dragon turd, and worse. But she kept on.

Because if Hiccup could train a dragonâ€¦.

Matching the corners again, and pinning the fabric under her axe, which was by far the most useful thing in her hand as always, she started again. A tiny stitch, then another, then one more, in as straight a line as she could manage, close together without unraveling or overlapping too much. Two pieces of cloth and one thread, to hold everything in, with no gaps and no weaknesses. When she got it right, the strength of her work was amazing.

Astrid had to hide her project from everyone, so there wasn't a great deal of time to work on it - which only made her more angry when she caught herself making a mistake and had to undo everything. Sewing was useful, but it wasn't as easy for her as, say, anything involving an axe. Though now that the axe was holding the fabric down for her, her progress was much easier. Axes really were the most useful of tools.

Still, she couldn't let anyone catch her sewing. If word got outâ€¦ Astrid shuddered briefly. She always felt she had to be the strongest, the fastest, the best warrior in any group, not only for her family pride and her own, but to ensure she didn't have to surrender her life as a warrior if she married.

She certainly valued how much her mother had made their home so safe, so welcoming for everyone, even during the days when dragon raids might burn their house down regularly. She loved knowing she'd return from practice cold and sore, and the door would open to a huge fire and the smell of bread and dinner. The feeling of peace would grow like an ember within her, warming her from the inside.

That was home, Astrid thought. It was the place that fed the fire of her heart, kept it warm, kept her going, knowing she'd return to the hearth at the end of the day.

It wasn't until she'd gone looking for Hiccup one afternoon that she realized how fortunate she was to have such warmth each night.

Having looked everywhere, she walked up the long staircase to their house, and opened the door, calling Hiccup's name. She'd realized quickly that Hiccup wasn't at home, but she stood a moment, staring at the ashes in the hearth. Hiccup's home, the chief's home really, wasâ€¦ well, it was cold. Cold and grey.

The fire was always out, because leaving it burning when no one was home was unsafe. And neither the chief nor Hiccup were home during the day. There was too much to do, for both of them. The windows let in barely any light because the shutters were closed. The breakfast dishes - or maybe last night's dinner dishes - were in a pile, and everything was cold. Cold and still.

Astrid knew she couldn't light a fire for them - who knew when they'd return? She couldn't move about their house, either, not without creating questions she did not want to answer, either from those who saw her go in, or from Hiccup and Stoick once they walked in their door. And she surely wasn't going to do their dishes. That would be weird.

But it made Astrid a little sad to think of Hiccup coming home to grey silence while she came home to warmth and the welcoming scent of dinner. She wanted to do something, something small but perhaps big enough that he'd notice, maybe. But not immediately connect it to her. That would bring more questions she didn't want to answer.

So she thought about it, each day as she walked to the riding school, as she and Stormfly practiced maneuvers, as she snuggled into her own bed, warm and soft each night. When the idea came to her, she could barely sleep. She wanted to start right then.

But another thing she'd learned from Hiccup was patience. Patience, quiet, and strategy.

Convincing Olaf to save her some wool each time he sheared the sheep was not difficult, since she brought him some sweets and some sharpened nadder quills for his knitting each time she visited him. It never occurred to Olaf to ask what she needed the wool for, as he was too delighted by the things she brought. Visiting Olaf also taught Astrid that Olaf might be lonely, and that a few minutes and a genuine interest in how he was doing that day made him smile wider each time he saw her. Visiting him brought her warmth, too.

Convincing Toothless to drop her on Hiccup's roof, that was another story.

She had tried to get Stormfly to do it, but there was no way Stormfly would drop Astrid on Toothless' domain. No way at all. Stormfly flat out refused and looked at Astrid like she had lost her wits.

So she had to talk to Toothless.

Astrid talked to Stormfly all the time, never sure that she was understood entirely but not bashful about doing so, either. She and

Stormfly communicated so easily, it was natural to use her voice, her words, and her gestures to connect with her dragon. Talking to Toothless was...different.

They got along, but the thought of approaching him alone made her nervous. More than her first day in the ring, or when she'd been dropped in a treetop. Toothless was smart, clever, and observant - and a little dangerous to her peace of mind. A bit like Hiccup.

But if Hiccup can train a dragonâ€¦|.

...

Astrid went to Toothless one afternoon while she knew Hiccup was down by the docks, and wouldn't be back for at least an hour. So she hoped, anyway.

She took the longer and more dangerous route to the house, coming behind the village. Astrid didn't want anyone to see her coming up the hillside from the village, even though the hike was more than arduous and made her sweaty and short of breath.

When she cleared the top of the hill, Toothless was waiting for her. Like he'd known she was coming.

Of course, he hadn't helped her climb the last bit toward the ridge, stubborn dragon.

He was sitting with his legs tucked under him, and his head up, wings folded, enjoying the warm sun on his back.

"Hi, Toothless." Astrid panted as she caught her breath.

Toothless murmured at her, and raised...well, if he had eyebrows, he would have been raising one. Clearly he wanted to know what she was doing, and why she'd taken a ridiculous route to get there.

"How are you?"

Toothless gazed at her. Not blinking.

"Ok. No small talk. I want to ask for your help."

Toothless murmured again, raising his chin a little and sniffing the air. He tried to trace a scent, and Astrid watched his nose lead his head in a slow circle until his gaze came to rest on the hem of her skirt. A feather was stuck there, caught under one of the metal studs on the side. Astrid pulled the feather out and played with it for a moment.

"I made aâ€¦| a pillow. For Hiccup. With wool. And feathers. These," Astrid said, holding the feather out for him to sniff.

Toothless looked at her without blinking again. Apparently he knew what feathers were.

"I can't go in the front door, because someone will see me. And I don't want to explain - I don't want anyone to... I want it to be a surprise."

Toothless huffed a breath, sounding impatient. Astrid continued on anyway.

"I don't want anyone to see me carrying it- for a lot of reasons that really aren't important right now. But I can't get to the roof window without you. Stormfly won't drop me on your roof, and I can't climb up there."

Toothless rolled his shoulders and flexed his wings slightly. It made him look bigger - dangerous. Astrid knew he wouldn't hurt her, but she fought the impulse to take a small step back. She looked down at the feather in her hands.

"I guess you want to know why."

Toothless tilted his head toward her.

"I know he's really tired, and his house is cold when he comes home, and Iâ€¦ I wanted to do something for him."

Toothless walked up very close to her, slowly. His eyes held her gaze and didn't blink. She felt like he was seeing more than just her face. She didn't look away, and held still as he came closer and closer, his nose a few inches away from her face, the warm current of his breath stirring the tips of her braid. Astrid didn't know what he was looking for, and didn't know what to say.

"Please, Toothless. I want to help him."

Toothless snorted and â€¦ nodded at her.

"You understand me."

One dragon-eyebrow slid up again.

"Yes, obviously you do. Sorry. So you'll help me?"

Another snort.

She reached out to his face with her hand.

"Thank you."

His eyes darted to her fingers, his pupils narrowing the way they did before he blasted something, or when he was angry, and she froze. But he glared at her only for a second. And then brushed her fingers with his cheek, rolling his head beneath her touch so she could stroke his forehead.

"Thank you, Toothless. I'll come back tomorrow." He curved his body and wing around her so she was in the curve of his shoulder, his wing behind her, his head beneath her hand. It was one of the warmest feelings of her life, so sharp and joyful.

He approved.

3. Chapter 3: Spilling Secrets

****Spilling Secrets****

After a week with his new pillow, Hiccup slept better than he had since the Great Battle. He slept longer and deeper, with vivid dreams of flying that stayed with him until the morning. He woke up feeling whole. Peaceful.

It helped that at just past four every afternoon without exception, he retreated to his room. He didn't always sleep, but the cool silence would welcome him from all the bright noise and voices of Berk, and allow him to refuel with something other than food.

Not that he didn't like food. He ate constantly. He'd started leaving a plate of bread and dried fruit by the door as he left each morning so he could pick it up and bring it upstairs with him each afternoon.

His afternoon break became his solace, and the pillow was a strange but integral part of it. It always smelled fresh and clean, like herbs left in the sun, each time he came into his room. He still wasn't sure where it had come from, either. None of his friends mentioned it, but a pillow would be a strange gift from someone like Snotlout or the twins. Astrid would have said something, or at least teased him about having successfully snuck into his house unseen, since he'd complained to her recently about the increasing impossibility of his doing so.

He hadn't remembered to ask his father about it, not when they were together, anyway. Stoick's bed didn't seem new or different, not that Hiccup went in there much. That was Stoick's space, and they respected the boundary of one another's chambers, an almost wordless understanding that the chief, and the future chief, each needed some space that was purely his own.

On this day, Hiccup needed that space more than ever. The morning's work had included construction of some new homes, and then settling a fight between the two builders who were at loud and aggressive odds over the design. It had taken both Stoick's brunt force and Hiccup's diplomacy to cool them both off enough that they could work together.

Stoick had gone off into the forest to chop some new lumber, he said, even though they didn't need any. Hiccup figured if he needed quiet, Stoick needed an axe and some fallen trees. They each coped with stress in their own way.

They both knew it was going to be another endless summer evening, when the hour grew late but sun sat high above the horizon, stubborn as a Viking with no intention of moving. More time to work, but less time to rest.

The silence that day when Hiccup closed the door behind him was like cold water and a gentle breeze. It felt like an embrace.

He picked up his plate of food and climbed the stairs slowly. His chamber was as he'd left it. Since the appearance of the pillow on his bed, he hadn't noticed any other signs of disturbance, aside from a few pieces of the roof scattered on the floor, shaken loose from Toothless stomping his tail to wake him up that morning.

He crossed to the bed and sat down. He was getting better about not

berating himself. If he slept, or if he didn't, he was better for the time he spent alone each day. A betterâ€|almost-chief. A better Hiccup.

Before the Great Battle, he'd spent most afternoons with Toothless, or designing training runs for the riders, or working in the forge - all solitary activities. He'd spent more time by himself than with anyone else.

Now, as he took on more responsibilities - responsibilities he enjoyed, most of the time - he'd lost most of his solitude. He couldn't hide in the forge to design or sketch ideas unless he did it at night, and that time was for the friendly chaos of being by a fire with the others, moments that had become important enough that he felt their absence if he didn't join them. Now Hiccup designed and drew wherever he was, sketching devices in his notebook and scribbling random pieces of half-formed ideas before he forgot them. He couldn't remember the last time he sat at his desk for an hour undisturbed.

But he also couldn't remember the last time he'd felt truly lonely, like he had so often before.

This afternoon, though, he should have at least an hour of quiet. Maybe more.

Hiccup was taking off his prosthesis when his elbow bumped the tankard of water he'd left on the bedside table, spilling it on the bed, and onto the pillow.

"Oh, no. Oh, Gods."

He yanked the pillow from the bed in a panic, shook the droplets off, and tried to keep the water from spreading inside.

Please don't let it be ruined.

He suspected there was wool in the stuffing, and if that got wet, it would smell like wet sheep, and that wasn't a smell anyone found comforting. Unless one were a sheep.

Oh, please. Oh, Gods, please, don't let it be ruined.

He frantically wiped and tried to blot the spreading stain of water, pulling the fabric away from the inside of the pillow. Then he noticed that the cover of the pillow was folded over at one end, so snug and perfectly made that it didn't immediately reveal that there was an opening. Hiccup slid his hand under the cover, and carefully but quickly pulled the pillow out.

The cover was a fold of simple cloth and stitching. It would dry easily on its own. He put it aside and turned his focus to the pillow itself.

Everything, the cover, the soft and mysterious insides, was dry.

He rolled his eyes at himself, for feeling such relief over a dry pillow, but kept checking it for any sign of dampness. Then his fingers brushed something on the underside of the taut fabric.

Hidden beneath the cloth that had covered the pillow was a tiny row of stitched letters.

They were carefully sewn in brown thread, tiny and sure, right along the seam where the slight texture wouldn't be noticed. Hiccup ran his fingertip over the stitching, so fine he had to bring it closer to his face to read it. And then he read it again. He read it with his eyes, and then with his fingertips, reverently.

"_Sleep well, with warmest dreams._"

He knew that writing.

He'd seen it on lesson ideas and battle plans, in school and in the great hall, or during games where scores were kept and rules needed to be written down at the start, lest Snotlout argue later that they were wrong.

He'd know that writing anywhere, even in thread instead of ink.

Astrid.

4. Chapter 4: Feather Weight

****Feather Weight****

Later that week...

* * *

><p>As she removed her armor to go to bed, Astrid noticed the shifting lights of the forge from her bedroom window. Knowing it was Hiccup, and wondering what he was up to, she left the shutter open. She told herself it was partly because it was still warm, but she also knew that from her bed, she would see a few sparks rising high into the air from the fire inside the forge.<p>

She fell asleep wondering what it was Hiccup was doing.

She woke up the next morning determined to find out.

After completing her usual morning chores in half the time, Astrid headed out as quickly as she could to find Hiccup. But he wasn't anywhere in Berk. She checked the hall, the dragon stables, the flight school, the forge, and was thinking seriously about sneaking into his house when she detoured to visit Stormfly. Her dragon liked to spend the morning around the dragon stable, snacking on fish and watching the young dragons, especially the younger nadders, who were just about to enter flight training.

"Morning, Stormfly!" Astrid greeted her and then greeted all the young nadders who rushed around her legs in looping patterns. She tried to keep their names straight and greet them individually, but they were too eager and too fast for her, so she gave up and laughed as they rolled around her boots and squawked at her.

Stormfly tilted her head and nuzzled Astrid again, pushing Astrid's

shoulder toward the corner where Stormfly slept most evenings.

"What's wrong, my friend? Need something?" Stormfly gave her another nudge, and Astrid walked into the area she thought of as Stormfly's nest. There were blankets and soft branches in a pile, along with one of Astrid's winter scarves, which Stormfly had gently unwound from Astrid's neck one day last winter before flying off with it. When Astrid later found it in Stormfly's nest, she had been painfully touched. Stormfly had wanted something of Astrid where she slept. Astrid hadn't known what to do with herself, but she'd hugged Stormfly until her eyes stopped stinging.

On this particular day, the sun was an unmoving beast in the sky and scarves wouldn't be needed for months yet, but Stormfly's bedding looked the same as it always did. Astrid wasn't sure what she was supposed to be looking for when Stormfly gave her one more hearty push toward the wall.

On a long and thin table that Gobber had built for Astrid to keep her flying gear organized, amid the replacement saddle straps and weapon accessories, there was a large, grey rock.

"What's this doing here?"

Astrid lifted the rock off the table and found— Stormfly.

It was a stack of three small pieces of paper, small enough that they disappeared under the rock, but large enough that they'd blow away without it. In the corner was a small, stylized A, and a detailed drawing of Stormfly's wing. Astrid turned the paper over, and found a picture of Stormfly, diving off a rock on the next piece.

The detail was extraordinary. The sketches were small, but the charcoal lines were fine and exact, capturing each feature of Stormfly's head, her eyes, her crown of spikes, the shifting curves and shadows of her body.

Astrid looked closer. Each tiny claw had been perfectly drawn.

She turned to the last page. Another sketch, this time of Stormfly grasping a fish and flying toward the horizon.

Astrid was shocked. She sat down hard on Stormfly's nest hard and looked at the pages again. They were so finely detailed, when she looked at them quickly, one after another, it was as if Stormfly were flying through the pages, her wing, then her body, then off into the sky with a fish. Astrid could almost hear the sound of Stormfly's happy squawk that signaled the start of feeding time.

Astrid looked at the pages repeatedly, bringing them closer to her face to make out the minute scratches that created the texture of her dragon's back, and the sweeps of charcoal that made the images appear almost as if they were moving. She was afraid to touch them. She couldn't put them down.

They captured Stormfly perfectly.

On the last page, she looked closer, and saw that as the tiny drawing of Stormfly disappeared into the horizon, a tiny figure rode with

her, arms up in the air in celebration with a long braid flying behind.

"It's me," she said to Stormfly, who had curled up behind her and was looking at the papers over Astrid's shoulder with one eye. "It's us."

She knew who had drawn them. Only Hiccup was that careful and that talented with his sketching. But how had he done this?

And why?

Astrid wanted to find Hiccup, tackle him and hold him down until he explained how he'd drawn Stormfly, and why he'd given her the drawings.

She flipped the final page over in her hand, and looked at the back.

He'd signed his work as usual, a tiny and precise mark in the corner: an H with a 3 wound through it.

But next to it was a faint sketch in pale grey, as if it had been drawn and then wiped away.

Astrid had to hold the paper up to the light of the morning sun to make it out.

It looked like a feather.

5. Chapter 5: Capturing Joy

****Capturing Joy****

One day earlier...

* * *

><p>Though he'd never admit it, not even if he were held over an open fire pit by Gobber's tongs, Hiccup still thought about Astrid's kiss.<p>

Flying, walking, eating, working, or sitting in the hall surrounded by the entire tribe yelling at once, the thought would sneak up on him and knock him sideways.

He didn't remember everything about that morning. He hadn't been awake for more than 10 minutes, and his world had turned over on its axis and was spinning wildly under him. Dragons on the roof. Dragons flying past his house. People cheering his name. His dad.

And then, Astrid.

Her kiss had made the world stop beneath him for that moment.

She never spoke of it, so he didn't either. It was almost like it hadn't happened, except that it had, and in front of more than half the village, too. And it happened in Hiccup's mind at least once every day.

As the world gradually stopped spinning out of control beneath him, as he learned to walk, climb, then run on his new leg, as he watched the changes taking place in Berk, that was the moment that sometimes kept him upright when he might have stumbled. Or sometimes it made him stumble when the path beneath him was smooth.

Astrid kissed him.

And, as Hiccup would quietly remind himself, feeling his ears turn red, she did so in front of everyone, including his father, who thankfully didn't mention it. Much.

Astrid had always been around him; they were the same age and the village wasn't that big. He'd always noticed her. And he'd known since the beginning that there was no way someone like him would be meant for someone like her. He used to be able to push thoughts of her aside easily.

Now he had to remind himself repeatedly not to think about her when he was with her, for fear he'd give something away.

Which meant that, when he was alone, all those thoughts of Astrid, all the things she'd done or said that he didn't immediately focus on, would rush into his mind, like they'd been waiting for a quiet moment to pounce.

Since he'd figured out that the pillow was from Astrid, that she'd made it in secret and somehow snuck into his house to give it to him, it was more difficult than ever not to think about her.

He wanted to ask her about it - especially because he couldn't for the life of him figure out how she'd gotten into his house - into his room - without being noticed. Hiccup had no idea how much time she'd spent sewing for him, but he suspected it was quite a lot.

He didn't know Astrid could even sew. She'd been openly derisive of attempts by village women to teach her any skill having to do with homekeeping, and Hiccup suspected it was partially out of fear that someday she'd be held back from battle. As if any chief with any brains would keep one of their best warriors from fighting.

But Hiccup understood better than anyone how painful it was to be told you ought to be different than who you were, that the things that interested you least were the things most expected of you. He knew how she felt, and he didn't want to make it worse. So he never hinted that he knew Astrid could sew, and he didn't tell anyone else, either.

That didn't stop him from examining the pillow constantly. She'd made him one of the kindest, most thoughtful gifts he'd ever received, and it was a marvel of design. He was curious about what she'd put inside it, how she'd made it.

And the stuffing, how was it always so soft? Sure, he could have picked open the stitches and peeked inside to see what the stuffing was, but he rejected the idea the minute he thought of it. For one thing, it would ruin the magic of it, that Astrid had made the pillow in such a way that it never went flat and was always comfortable.

And for another, he couldn't bring himself to undo stitches she'd made, even a few of them. Every part of it had been made for him, and he valued every piece.

So, instead of thinking about her, he'd thought constantly of what he could create in turn to surprise her. It wasn't just a pillow. It was a gauntlet. He couldn't allow a gesture like that to go unanswered. The game had begun.

Problem was, Astrid was impossible when it came to gift giving.

Every Snoggletog he had to think so hard his brains would ache, trying to come up with something unique, but not too obvious. This had been no different.

The idea had come to him one afternoon when they'd been flying as a group, practicing evasion and trying out Snotlout's idea of formation attacks with quick changing patterns that he would call out as they flew. Snotlout was loud enough, but he learned quickly how difficult it was to direct and maneuver at the same time. After Hookfang tossed Snotlout into the water for trying to steer him in two directions at once, they took a break on top of one of the islands.

Snotlout, the twins, and Fishlegs had begun drawing sequences in the dirt, arguing over why they hadn't worked. But Astrid, never shy about being the one to restore them to some kind of order, had been silent during their discussion.

Hiccup had been about to speak when he noticed Astrid by herself, standing at the cliff's edge, watching Stormfly dive and sweep into the sky as she looked for fish.

There was a gentle smile on Astrid's face that was rare, but familiar to Hiccup. She'd smiled at him like that one time.

He remembered it perfectly.

Flying home that evening in the orange and gold light of the sunset, he had quietly signaled to Toothless to slow down, and they watched as Astrid and Stormfly flew loops and twists in the air together. Astrid's hair looked like fire lit by the sun. Her laughter had covered the water. Her smile filled the sky.

And then, in that instant, he'd known what he wanted to give her. He wanted to give her that moment in the sky, that joy she felt in flying, reflected in the happiness lighting her face.

He'd been awake all that night, and used most of his supply of paper to achieve what he wanted. But it had been worth it. He knew it was some of the best work he'd done. He hoped she had liked it.

Of course, Hiccup had also hoped that, now that he'd given her his gift, he'd be able to think of something else.

But so far, he was still thinking of her smile.

****Heavier Things****

Days became weeks after Hiccup left Astrid the drawings, and in that time he saw very little of her. They were both consumed with dragon practice.

The dragons who were nearly grown were ready to be taught basic commands for flight training. This year, though, they were being led into a new pre-training program that Astrid and Fishlegs had designed. Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs, Snotlout, Ruffnut and Tuffnut each took a small group of dragons, all different breeds, first to various places in Berk, then to smaller islands offshore. Each group worked independently, because the young dragons were far too easily distracted in larger groups.

It was very basic training - commands, rewards, and then new commands, with the teens and the adult dragons working together to try and control the chaos.

The training schedule kept them all busy from sunup to sundown, and though the days were getting shorter, they were still long enough that Hiccup fell into bed and into a deep sleep almost immediately.

After a few weeks of the new program, Hiccup could see the difference. The young dragons understood the rules, they grasped the commands, and they were as eager to please the adult dragon watching them as they were to please whichever viking had fish to offer as a reward.

Finally, the young dragon class entered regular training, and Hiccup went back to the forge to help Gobber. There weren't daily battles anymore, but there was no shortage of work for them, between maintaining dragon riding equipment, making saddles, repairing older weapons, and sharpening various tools.

One late afternoon, when the sunlight sliced through the forge in angled blades, Hiccup was finishing up a design at his desk when he heard someone come into the forge.

He was about to call out to whomever it was when he realized that whomever had come in wasn't moving. The forge was too crowded with tools and equipment for anyone to move about without making noise or running into something.

He'd definitely heard the door open, but nowâ€¦ silence.

Whoever it was, if they were trying to get the jump on him, it wasn't happening. He slid off his low stool, and silently moved along the wall to peek through the doorway into the main work area.

He expected to see Tuffnut, or maybe one of the younger kids, sneaking in to take something or to scare him, but to his shock, it was Astrid.

She was standing in the middle of the room by the fire pit, her head tilted, listening to see if anyone else was in the forge. Once she figured she was alone, she moved toward the wall of equipment they used for working with softened metal.

Hiccup watched from his hiding place as she picked up various tools, hefted them in one hand while holding her axe in the other, then put them down, one after another.

This was easily the strangest thing he'd ever seen her do. And he'd seen Astrid attack trees and rocks with no provocation.

What was she looking for?

He thought about stepping into the room and asking her, but clearly, she'd wanted to be alone. So he watched. And tried not to feel guilty about it.

He hadn't seen her for more than a handful of minutes since dragon training had begun. He watched her braid swing over her shoulder as she lifted a pair of tongs, and noticed her frown as she roamed around the forge. She picked up a hammer, and then a larger mallet, held them alongside her axe, then put the tools down.

She looked the same, as strong, beautiful, and fierce as ever. But also puzzled. What was she trying to do?

Hiccup lost sight of her when she went into the storage room where they kept the older weapons they didn't use much anymore. When she came back into the forge, she had four large swords across her arms.

After dumping them on the table with a loud crash, she froze. When no one came to see what was going on, she relaxed, and started lifting them up like she had the forge equipment, one after the other, always with her axe in her other hand.

Some were too large for her to lift one-handed, and others were simply too long for someone of her height to wield easily.

Each time, she'd lift a sword, or in one case a spear, and balance it in one hand while holding her axe in the other.

It looked like she was comparing the weight.

This was enormously puzzling to Hiccup. Of course the swords she'd chosen weighed more than her axe. She had to know that. She'd chosen the largest swords they had, the ones he and Gobber had trouble moving about sometimes. Why was she comparing them to her axe?

Hiccup watched as she made a few more trips into the storage area, trying spears, crossbows, a set of old metal spears, more swords, and at one point, the shovel they used for cleaning the fire pit.

The longer he stood there, the more confused he became, but after watching in silence for that long, he couldn't reveal himself. It would be obvious that he'd been spying on her, and, well, she was armed.

Very heavily armed.

Watching her go through most of their tools one by one, Hiccup thought about the weapons Astrid trained with, and why she might be

looking for something bigger. She had a bow and arrows, a sword, a smaller sword, a spear made of lethally sharpened wood that was perfect for tossing, and her aim with all of them was legendary. He'd sharpened all of them at one point or another, and he'd seen her use them.

Hiccup used to watch her train when they were younger, and it never ceased to amaze him how strong and how fearless she was. She was as fluent in weapons as he now was in dragons. There was nothing she couldn't accomplish with an axe in her hand, no weapon she couldn't master after brief instruction.

With a huge thump and a slightly larger growl of frustration, Astrid put the last of the weapons down onto the table along with her axe. She put her hands on the edge of the table, leaned on them and glared down at the pile of bent and sharpened metal in front of her.

What was it she needed? If he could figure it out, he could -

Then Astrid picked up a smaller sword and paired it with her axe in one hand. Wrapping her hand around both the sword hilt and the axe handle, she tried swinging the axe with the added weight alongside it. She managed a few swings left, right, and above her head before she lost her grip and the sword clattered to the ground.

Astrid jumped back, startled at the noise. Hiccup had startled as well, but managed to keep himself hidden. The sword had masked the sound of his leg scraping the ground, and Astrid didn't give any sign that she knew he was there.

Thank the Gods. She'd be furious. And a furious Astrid was terrifying. He knew from experience.

Moving quickly, she gathered up the swords she'd taken and brought them back to the storage room. She cleaned up after herself - which made Hiccup smile - and picked up her axe.

As she moved toward the door, though, she stopped. Her back was to Hiccup, so he couldn't quite see what she was looking at. He tried to picture the room he was in nearly every day of his life. What did they keep by the door? Leather straps for saddles, and chains of assorted sizes, andâ€¦|.

Chains.

He heard the soft clink of metal and knew the sound instantly. Astrid was trying to wind a chain around her axe.

Why? Was she planning a kidnapping?

She turned, and then, he understood. She'd wound a long, broad link chain around the axe head, crossing the chain over itself three or four times, then hooked the ends onto her fingers. Keeping the chains taut, she placed her other hand atop the fingers holding the links, and began to swing the axe again.

This time, she maintained her grip longer. The axe spun, flew over her head, behind her, then in circles past her shoulders.

Hiccup smiled. He understood what she was hunting for, now that he

saw her practicing. He knew what he could do to help.

She just had leave first.

Except he didn't want her to go. This was the longest he'd seen her in nearly two months. She was exactly the same, yet everything was different.

Eventually, she unwound the chain, breathing faster, her face shining with exertion in the dim light of the forge. She hung the chain up back where it had been, and quietly closed the door behind her.

After waiting a few minutes to make sure he was alone, Hiccup threw some wood onto the embers in the fire pit, and go to work.

7. Chapter 7: A Weighted Surprise

****A Weighted Surprise****

Astrid had three problems. But she didn't have solutions to those three problems. So they were all making her cranky.

First, her sketches. She couldn't keep them in Stormfly's nest. They'd get lost or smudged or would blow away, get wet when it rained or get scorched by a stray blast of baby gronkel fire.

But she couldn't keep the drawings with her. They'd get just as smudged in the folds of her skirt, or, if she fell into the water, she'd lose them.

Or, even worse, she'd distract herself by taking them out and gazing at them again and someone would see them, or her, or both.

She couldn't keep them where anyone else would find them, either.

Unacceptable.

Three sheets of paper were making her indecisive and...that was weird. Indecision made her angry. Especially her own.

In the end, she hid them in her room, under the rock that had hidden them from view in Stormfly's nest. The rock was behind her sword and her favorite shield, and everyone in Berk knew never to touch Astrid's weapons.

She took them out at night before she went to bed, and thought about them during the day when she was out riding Stormfly or practicing attack sequences.

Every time she did, she smiled.

When no one was looking.

Which led her to problem the second: it was her turn. Hiccup would NOT get the last word in this unspoken conversation. Not a chance. She had the next move.

She had to think of something for him.

And she had to do it while trying not to make it look like she was watching Hiccup.

Or aware of Hiccup.

Or thinking about Hiccup.

Or had any interest whatsoever in the details of Hiccup's day—when, in reality, she did.

She had to think of something for him.

Which meant watching and observing Hiccup while trying to avoid his notice, which was really challenging because Hiccup noticed everything.

Which brought her to problem number three.

Hiccup was never around.

If they were training dragons, they were apart. But afterward, he would vanish. She'd be at the docks, and he'd be in the woods. She'd expect to see him at meals, only he'd never show up. He'd be at the flight school leading exercises, but when she looked for him after, or at night, he was nowhere to be found.

And that was making her really mad.

How in Thor's name was she supposed to watch someone while pretending not to, if they were never around for her watch?!

Astrid felt like her entire brain was mixed up, thoughts of Hiccup fighting with her intention to not think of Hiccup in the first place. She needed to think of something to give him, but didn't want to think about him because when she did, she had a hard time stopping. Her face would heat, and she hated that. Plus she did not like feeling as if she wasn't in control of her own mind.

She wanted to find him just so she could yell at him to get out of her head.

It was enough to make her want to throw herself into the water so she could wash the thoughts of him from her head while she scrubbed her hair.

Fortunately for her, it was washday.

Washday for Astrid started with axe throwing.

She was determined to remain one of the strongest in her age group, but she had to work at it. She was often frustrated at how easy it was for someone like Snotlout to gain muscle, or for even Fishlegs to increase his upper body strength, while she had to fight twice as hard. It wasn't difficult for her to improve her aim, her throwing distance, or her endurance. Astrid was very strong, and she made sure the others knew it. But it took a lot of work to keep her strength, and she didn't want to lose any of it, so she practiced constantly.

Washday began with a run through the woods with her axe, jumping boulders and dodging low branches, followed by an hour or so of throwing, climbing, and chopping, all with the intention of building her strength and dexterity. It was a sweaty, dirty workout, which is why she saved it for washday.

One of the reasons Berk was situated on the cliffside, apart from the view and the accompanying ability to see any incoming attack from the sea, was the hot springs. Within the thickest part of the forest, beyond Hiccup's cove, were a set of two hot springs, each big enough to hold four or five people.

And since washday for Vikings was once a week, the path to and from the hot springs had been worn by generations of vikings, all of whom had washed and soaked their tired bodies in the enormous coves of swirling hot water. Tradition was sometimes pretty good, Astrid thought, as she collected what she'd need for washing and put it into her pack.

She ran, jumped, rolled through some dirt, flipped backwards, tumbled through a field, circled back, and then did it again.

But when she got to her practice area with her axe and her bag, there was already an axe there.

"Great Odin's beard," Astrid ground out as she looked around.

Did someone know about her practice area? No one knew where it was! And she was not sharing. Astrid could feel her blood begin to simmer beneath her skin. If this was Snotlout being stupid, he'd get a chop to the head. Sideways.

She dropped her pack alongside a low rock and carried her axe as she crept along the perimeter of the clearing she'd long thought of as her own.

But no one was there.

So who left an axe against a tree, the tree she always practiced on? Who had been there?

Astrid waited in aching stillness to make sure she truly was alone, until the sounds of the forest began to fill the air around her with buzzing and chirping.

Then, she approached the axe.

It was old, a very abused weapon, with notches and gashes in the side, but the edge was so sharp, it gleamed.

The handle was new, though, and had some kind of odd metal peg through it, about two hands below the axe blade. And there was a...she lifted it to bring it closer.

Was that a ring of metal around the neck of the axe?

Yes. Yes, it was.

And there were three more on the ground of various sizes.

What theâ€¦?

Who chops metal rings?

Or adds rings to an axe? It's a weapon. It doesn't need earrings.

Astrid put her axe down gently, and grasped the older axe with her throwing arm.

It fit her hand perfectly, though it was definitely longer than her axe. And with the metal ring beneath the blade, it was much heavier.

Wait a minuteâ€¦.

She thought of her attempts to increase the size of the weapons she threw.

And how she'd visited the forge one night, looking for options to weigh down her axe.

Hiccup.

She was going to kill him. With both axes.

How did he...?

If this was from himâ€¦oh, that _troll_. He'd be one up on her. That was not acceptable.

She couldn't resist trying it out, though. She hefted the old but new axe in her hand, and swung it to practice a few times. It was perfectly balanced, even with the ring beneath the axe blade. And there was room on the neck for the larger rings as well.

It was just what she'd needed.

She was going to kill him.

After she thanked him, of course.

But then she'd kill him. Sneaky devil, that Hiccup.

To be sure her anger was entirely justified, Astrid tipped the blade toward the ground and looked at the base of the handle.

Burnt into the edge of the rounded base was an A. So it was hers now. Good.

But where was his signature? Where was that H with the 3 woven through it? She looked over the handle, the top, the area beneath the blade, the neck under the ring, on the ring itself. He hadn't signed it.

Maybe it wasn't from Hiccup. The idea was disappointing, almost.

But then who? It had to be Hiccup. His signature had to be here somewhere.

She gripped the base knob of the axe in her hand, ready to try throwing it, and felt an edge against her palm. Using downward momentum to force the blade into the ground - it cut through the grass and rocky ground beneath with no effort, she noted - Astrid looked closer at the end.

The knob was separate. Maybe it would come off if she twisted. No, ok, then, pulling at it? No, not that either.

But it was definitely separate.

Astrid tried twisting it again the other way, as hard as she could. Just as she was about to give up, it loosened, just a tiny bit. Enough to convince her to double her efforts.

The knob came off, unscrewing along a track carved into the handle. The track had been filled with metal, making it more difficult to unscrew - and less likely to wear down.

Brilliantly designed.

She was still going to kill him.

Because beneath the knob, which was also filled with metal to give counterbalance to the increased weight of the axe and the rings, Astrid found that elusive signature. An H and the 3 had been branded deep into the base of the handle.

Astrid screwed the weighted knob back into place, stood, and stepped backward into the clearing. She took aim, and threw. The axe landed deep in the tree with a very satisfying thunk.

Practice had begun.

8. Chapter 8: Sea Monsters

****Sea Monsters****

By the time Astrid headed to the hot springs, it was late in the afternoon, long past the usual time that villagers would make the trek through the forest. The sun was still barely moving across the sky each day, but in the afternoon it would slowly sink behind the trees, and the area around the hot water would grow colder - not a pleasant transition after one's bath, especially if drying off took awhile.

Astrid was exhausted. She'd figured out several attack sequences with the new axe that had resulted in significant damage to the fallen tree she used as a target, but also significant soreness in her arms and shoulders. She was sweaty and tired, but content, having worked out all her frustrations - most of them, anyway - and cleared her head of all that confusion. Axes never ceased to be useful, in Astrid's opinion.

The hot springs were positioned one behind the other near a rocky cliff. The men used the first one and the women used the slightly larger one positioned farther back, partially bordered by a large rock wall. The village rumor was that the first chieftain had made

that rule so that no curious young men could wander slowly past the women's bathing spring on their way to their own, and that the men in the spring could protect the women from any dragons that might come flying in from the forest to attack them.

Astrid never gave the men's hot spring much thought. All the girls knew that at least once in their lives, the boys would try to spy on them on wash day. Gunhild, one of the strongest of the women, used to patrol the perimeter of the hot spring, and no one wanted to get caught by Gunhild. Plus, there weren't that many places to hide, so after one close call or maybe even getting caught and receiving a punch to the head for their trouble, most of them stayed away.

But Astrid had never spied on the boys. She never saw the point. What was there to be curious about? Most of the boys she knew weren't shy about removing shirts or leggings when it was too hot, and Thor knew that Tuffnut would be delighted to be nude at all times, except that his sister would find new ways to torture him if he were. There was very little left to the imagination with some of the men of Berk.

So when Astrid walked by the men's hot spring, she didn't even look up or try to peek through the tree branches. She was hot, sweaty, very dirty, and she was carrying two axes, a set of ring weights, and a bag of washing supplies. She had no interest in stopping until she was immersed in hot, bubbling water past her eyebrows.

But then she heard her name.

Or what she thought was her name.

So she slowed down, spreading each step across her entire foot so she wouldn't make any noise on the dry leaves and pine needles on the path. Was someone looking for her?

Then she heard an exhausted sigh, and it sounded like...Hiccup?

Oh, no. Very much no, in fact. She was not stopping.

She forced her aching legs to move faster, and nearly ran the rest of the way to the hot spring, not willing to be seen, or be caught looking around to confirm whether he was there.

She was not interested.

Not. Interested.

Fortunately for Astrid, her spring was deserted, and within moments she was underwater, scrubbing her hair and stretching her limbs in every direction. She washed, rinsed, washed again, swam, and, for fun, did handstands in the water where the rock shelf was just low enough for her to reach with her fingertips. Her hair was a wild yellow cloud underwater, and while she preferred it contained on land, in the spring, she secretly loved how her hair would shift and dance with the bubbling current. She'd hold her breath until her chest burned for a few extra minutes of watching how the water created a gleaming, sinuous sea monster of her hair. It was beautiful.

Eventually, the growing shadows of the trees formed tall sentries on the far wall, announcing the descent of the sun and the arrival of

evening - and meal time. Now that she was clean and less achy, Astrid was starving. And she was pretty sure tonight's dinner would be stew. She loved stew. It had gravy. It was made of gravy, in fact. Stew wouldn't be stew without the gravy.

With a smile and a growl of her stomach, Astrid dried her skin, dressed, and began to comb the snarls out of her hair and re-braid it. It took some time, as her hair was heavy and very thick. Which would be excellent if she were openly vain about her hair. Which she wasn't.

She was gentle with it, to protect her sea monster, of course.

By the time her hair was tamed and she was fully dressed, the sun had ducked behind the forest. She tossed the rings in her pack atop her drying cloth, picked up both axes, and started the trek back to the village.

On her way past the other spring, she paused. There was no way he - whoever it was - was still there, right? She'd been at her cove nearly an hour. She had to be the only one on this side of the forest.

Maybe she should check.

Just in case.

9. Chapter 9: Watching and Waiting

****Watching and Waiting****

Dropping her new weapon and her pack by a tree, Astrid shouldered her own axe and crept up behind a large rock that was a safe distance from the path into the men's hot spring. She hadn't ever been to the other cove, and she wasn't sure what it looked like, but she definitely didn't want to get caught. She stood up slowly to peek over the side.

And saw...another boulder.

Astrid rolled her eyes, about to give up, but then she froze.

She definitely heard someone. Or something.

She slid around the side of the rock in front of her and crouched in the narrow space between the two. Then she peeked again around the side.

A sliver of the sun cut through the trees and lit the moving water. It looked like molten metal in the forge. She squinted at the light and looked around the perimeter of the spring. It was smaller than her spring, but also looked deeper, given that the men used it, and most of them were taller than the women. Some of them, anyway.

There didn't appear to be anyone there, though. Maybe her imagination was tricking her - or torturing her. Frowning, she stood up - and immediately crouched back down.

Good Gods.

It was Hiccup.

He was sitting on a flat stone by the edge of the spring, just on the other side of the path.

She listened for any indication he had noticed her. When she heard only the spring and the whisper of the trees, she peeked around the side of the boulder again.

He was reclined back onto his arms, his legs extended in front of him. His hair was damp, so clearly he'd already bathed.

What was he doing? Why was he just sitting there?

Hiccup stared at the water. His brow was furrowed and his lips were moving slightly, which usually meant he was trying to figure something out and probably murmuring to himself. That would also explain why he hadn't heard her approach. She could toss rocks into the spring in front of him and he'd still be in his own world.

Why didn't he have a shirt on? Wasn't he cold? He should put on a shirt already.

Hiccup sat up, and Astrid ducked back, but not so far that she couldn't watch what he was doing.

He must have left the axe he made in the clearing on his way to the spring - which would have been a lot of extra walking. Did he hurt himself? Is that why he was sitting there?

The sunlight reflected off the gently churning water and spun across Hiccup's face as he reached for his left leg.

But Astrid missed whatever he did next, because she forgot to blink and a bug flew straight into her eye.

When she'd stopped shuddering in revulsion and removed the bug from her eyelashes - ew - she peeked again. Hiccup was still sitting on the flat stone, still shirtless, leggings on but rolled up past his knees, with his arm curled around his right leg.

Did he need help?

Should she say something?

When had he grown...muscles?

Reminding herself to blink, and telling herself she was only making sure he was ok, Astrid stood and watched as Hiccup picked up a cloth and rubbed it over his left knee, then put it aside to gently feel the skin beneath.

Then he reclined back again, and looked at the sunset.

What was he waiting for?

He wasn't going to do something she didn't want to see, was he?

Astrid realized she'd never seen so much of Hiccup... without his clothes. Snotlout was infamous for still going out into rainstorms with a bar of soap and little else, and the rest of the boys around their age took some of their cues from him, unfortunately.

Hiccup, though, he never took off his shirt in front of anyone, and never rolled up his leggings, even when it was sticky and hot. Astrid didn't know if it was because he was shy or because he lacked that obnoxious show-off trait that Snotlout had too much of, but the result was the same: she was fascinated by the parts of Hiccup she'd never seen before.

He scratched his chest absently and Astrid had to close her eyes and remind herself to swallow. She was forgetting basic life skills the longer she stood there.

This was ridiculous. Whatever in Odin's name Hiccup was doing, it was clear he wasn't in any danger.

And she had to go home and eat.

It was time to leave.

Astrid didn't move.

And neither did Hiccup.

Was he avoiding something? Or someone? He didn't look upset.

He kept checking the edges of his missing leg, feeling the skin, then sitting back.

Astrid watched as the sun moved lower in the sky, the light sliced by the pine trees into bands that moved across the water, each one filling with dancing swirls of steam from the hot spring. It was beautiful - and also completely unfair that the men's spring enjoyed sunlight longer.

Hiccup was watching the water and idly tapping his fingertips on the stone beneath him. He didn't look unhappy or sick or anything. His eyes were unfocused, the way they were when he was deep in thought, but there were no lines on his face that indicated he was in pain. He looked content.

When had he grown more hair on his body?

Astrid shook her head and told herself again it was time to leave. Time to stand up, grab her things, and head for Berk.

He was clearly dry, and he wasn't...really cold, as far as she could tell.

He should get dressed and get back to Berk, too. She wasn't going to tell him that, but she could have.

One last peek, she told herself, and then home.

She slowly looked around the side of the boulder and saw him putting on his shirt.

Good, she thought, dismissing any disappointment that she was not feeling.

And then she understood what he had been doing.

He wasn't wearing his prosthesis. Astrid could see it on the rock next to Hiccup, now that his shirt was on.

He had been checking the skin that rested in the cup of the prosthesis, and making sure it was fully dry.

It made sense. If she wore boots with damp feet for even an hour, she was certain to get blisters.

She imagined his leg, which held up half his body, would fare much worse if it were damp.

When Astrid saw him begin to position his prosthesis, she realized it was WAY past time to go. He was going to discover her hiding place, and - she refused to think any further in that direction, because it wasn't going to happen.

Astrid crept away as quickly and quietly as possible, grabbed her things, and ran all the way back the Berk.

...

Later that evening in the great hall, Astrid sat with her back to the fire pit so her braid would dry a little faster. She had a charcoal pencil in her hand, sketching new targets that might work better with a weighted axe, and beneath them, additional sketches that weren't targets at all.

The door opened behind her, but she didn't look up. The hall was full of people coming and going at this hour.

But when a hand appeared near the edge of her paper, she put her arm across the page, sat back and looked up, startled.

Hiccup smiled at her, a very small, teasing smile that made his eyes gleam a bit and made her want to poke him with the sharp end of her pencil. Her face must have communicated her thoughts of stabbing, because his smile disappeared, and he rearranged his features into a very serious expression - but it was just as teasing.

She raised a brow.

"Good evening, Astrid," he said.

He grinned again, and then walked away toward the cups and the mead.

Astrid watched him, then looked down at where his hand had been.

A metal ring, a few pine needles clinging to it, now rested on the corner of her paper.

She really was going to kill him.

10. Chapter 10 - The Cartography of Strength

****The Cartography of Strength****

The following week...

* * *

><p>Astrid avoided Hiccup after that night in the Great Hall, not sure she'd be able to control her temper. She was even less certain of her habit of blushing. Her head had become a Monstrous Nightmare. One stray thought of Hiccup and she set her own face on fire.<p>

She spent most of her time with Stormfly, training a group of young dragon riders in cartography. She had them each map the contours of their island, marking off water, places to land, and places to shelter should a storm or an attack come from the sea.

It took nearly four days for each rider to develop their own map. Then she had them trade and try to use one another's to navigate. Most of them had spent their entire lives on Berk, but seeing the familiar from an entirely new angle was very disorienting. They each had to know the established routes for safe and accurate flying for defense, and for daily chores and ordinary travel, and they had to recognize Berk from the air as well as from the ground. Thus the map project, which Hiccup had designed with Fishlegs, became standard training for all new riders.

Hours in the air gave Astrid a lot of time to think, and if her face turned red, she could blame it on the wind, which was slowly turning colder as winter approached. Summer arrived from the sea, but winter came from the forest, and as she and the other riders flew above the treetops, she could feel the air growing sharper each morning.

Astrid had a lot to think about and felt like she was running out of room in her own mind. She used to be able to clear her head of everything with axe throwing and target practice, but Hiccup was a part of that now, too. She didn't mind, though. Her weighted axe was perfect. She added rings, removed them, tried new tricks and techniques. And when she picked up her own axe, the one she always carried with her, she was able to throw it farther, and land it deeper into any target she chose. Thanks to Hiccup, she was more lethal.

And more confused.

She varied between being irritated with Hiccup for intruding on her thoughts so much, and irritated with Hiccup for being one up on her now, gifts-wise. She had no idea what to give him. Thor curse him for being observant and clever.

She knew Hiccup, and knew what he liked and what he was capable of - at times more than he knew of himself. But she didn't know exactly what he was missing, or what else he might like to have.

What would make him feel the way his gifts had made her feel, understood andâ€¦|. Astrid tried to think of the right word. Appreciated?

And that was the part she was most irritated about, that Hiccup so clearly understood her. She loved to throw axes and she loved that she was strong. She loved to roam the skies with Stormfly. She could sew and she didn't want anyone to know about it.

Astrid also knew her irritation with Hiccup also shielded a more tender feeling beneath, painful like a fresh bruise, and she didn't want to touch it, or even look at it.

What else did she know about him?

She knew she could barely be around him at this point, after having spied on him at the springs. She didn't know where to look, because she knew if she looked at him, she'd stare. It was like when she flew above Berk for the first time, never having seen it from the sky before. She didn't want to blink or miss a moment, it was so new and beautiful.

Astrid groaned in frustration, prompting Stormfly to slow down and look up at her over one wing.

"I'm ok, girl. Justâ€¦ annoyed. At myself."

Stormfly seemed to understand and flew onward, back toward Berk. The last of the students had traced their routes home, and she was following them, making sure no one fell behind.

What did she know about Hiccup?

He knew dragons. He invented things. He was stubborn and intelligent. He had one leg. He had green eyes. He was kind, and sometimes shy. He didn't hate anyone, or even get angry all that much. He used to be annoying, and now he was fascinating. He had arm muscles she wanted to trace with her fingers.

No.

Astrid shook her head.

Not thinking about that.

Where did Hiccup spend most of his time?

With Toothless, of course. In the sky. Or in the forge. And sometimes in his room.

After seeing him at the hot springs, she had a piece of an idea for a gift, but it was going to take a while to create. And it would involve a lot of stealth and strategy. She needed something sooner. He couldn't stay ahead of her that long.

Once the students had all landed and she saw them leading their dragons to their respective homes, she landed Stormfly by the dragon stable. Stormfly happily nuzzled Astrid's shoulder, and wandered off toward her nest and the young nadders she looked after.

"Good night, girl," Astrid said, watching Stormfly squawk with joy at the younger dragons.

Astrid had nothing else to do at that moment, and still hadn't

thought of anything.

Maybe if I go talk to Hiccup, I'll figure something out. I haven't seen him in a few days, anyway.

As she walked to the forge, Astrid tried to think when the last time she saw Hiccup had been. That night in the great hall, after sheâ€| when he gave one of the weighted rings back to her?

And there went her face, on fire again.

She tried to think of another time she'd seen him after that, but couldn't. Maybe she'd been too good at avoiding him.

Gobber was just closing the door when she arrived.

"Hey, Gobber. Where's Hiccup?"

"Oh, you don't know?"

That didn't sound good.

"No, what?"

"Hiccup's sick. Got whatever's been going around the village."

"I've been flying the past few d-" Astrid stopped, noticing the deeper lines around Gobber's mouth. He looked exhausted. And worried. "How sick is he?"

"Pretty bad. Hasn't been out of bed. Stoick says he's been sleeping, except when Stoick wakes him up to make sureâ€| well, you know."

To make sure he would wake up. Not like after the Great Battle, when Hiccup hadn't woken up for...far too long, not even when Stoick repeatedly tried to rouse him, and Astrid had started to wonder if he'd ever wake up at all.

"He wakes up, though?"

Gobber nodded. "Aye. Stoick's thinking Hiccup's getting better, though you wouldn't know it to look at him."

The Gobber's face brightened.

"Did you need something sharpened, Astrid? I can take care of that for you," he said, turning back toward the door.

"Uh, Iâ€|" Gobber smiled at her, and she didn't have the heart to tell him no. "Yeah, my axe could use some attention, I think."

"Not to worry. Have a seat, and I'll tune your fine instrument of war in no time."

"Thanks, Gobber." Astrid hopped up onto one of the tables. She could see the door to Hiccup's room at the back of the forge, but knew there was no way she could wander in there, not with Gobber watching. He had started the sharpening wheel and was inspecting the axe blade.

"Looks like you've seen some action - with trees. Got sap all over the blade here."

"Yeah. Target practice."

"Ah," Gobber nodded. He angled the blade against the stone, and sparks flew around him. Then he flipped the axe and sharpened the other side. Astrid hadn't realized how much she associated the sound of sharpening stones with Hiccup, but seeing the sparks and hearing the squealing roar of the stone made her look around for him instinctively, before she remembered he wasn't there.

Gobber must have seen her expression change. When the stone came to a halt and he picked up a cloth to polish the blades, he wandered over to Astrid, his voice low.

"Hiccup will be all right. He's not the strongest lad, but he's more stubborn than most."

Astrid inhaled sharply, prepared to protest, to argue with Gobber about Hiccup, but stopped when she saw his face. He was worried, too.

Astrid was so used to thinking of Hiccup as so integral to Berk, she'd forgotten that, physically, he was not as large as his presence. He took up so much space in her life, to say nothing of his role in Berk. So much of Berk existed now because of his ingenuity, or through his efforts to change the way they dealt with dragons and everything else. So many things around her, that she'd seen every day of her life, were different, and were all connected to and through Hiccup.

"He is strong," Astrid said. "Even when he's not."

Gobber watched her closely, and placed her axe back in her hand.

"Aye. That he is."

11. Chapter 11 - The Gods Sneak In

****The Gods Sneak In****

Hiccup had a fever. He knew it, too. It was the worst feeling, being cold and hot at the same time. His knees and arms ached, his forehead and hair were sweaty and warm, and his body was shivering under two furs and a blanket.

He was trying to sleep, but not doing a great job of it. He'd think he was asleep, but then realize he was listening to voices from the village. The sun would move through the window, and he would see its progress jumping across the room like a Terror. He tried to relax and distract himself from how awful he felt, and when that didn't work, he tried again.

And when he fell asleep, Stoick would come in and wake him up, confusing him even more.

His thoughts were crashing into one another, like waves from the

incoming tide breaking onto the rocks. He couldn't hold onto one thought before another took its place. Sleep was proving to be a challenge.

He remembered being at the forge, and feeling increasingly awful. One moment he'd been fine, sharpening a farming blade for Olaf and listening to tales of the romantic courtship between the young sheep in Olaf's herd. He'd given Olaf back his blade, and realized his legs had started to ache. Both of them. Deeply.

He knew he had walked back to his desk to sit down, and he remembered how sweaty and tired he had been.

But he didn't remember much after that.

There was some kind of illness was spreading through the village. Stoick was never ill, of course, but sicknesses were always attracted to Hiccup, especially if they involved embarrassing things like profuse sweating or vomiting.

He didn't think he was vomiting.

He was sweaty, though.

Who had brought him to his room?

Was it Toothless?

Maybe one of Olaf's sheep carried him home?

He heard Toothless land on the roof, and was about to force his body to move so he could open the window hatch for him when he saw the window open.

Did Toothless learn how to open the window? With what? His claws?

His wings were too large. He couldn't grab the latch with his teeth.

How'd he open the window?

Hiccup's fever did a slow tumble with his imagination, as he focused - or, tried to focus - on the window latch.

He saw hands, dark, shadowed hands, reaching into the room from the window's edge.

Toothless had grown hands?

Maybe he was dying, Hiccup thought.

Maybe Odin was coming to greet him. He had to be really sick if Odin were here.

Were Odin and Toothless coming to him?

That wasn't right. He was supposed to go to them, except he was too sick to get out of bed. But he didn't think he was dying, either, not like that time he was sick when he was much younger and felt like his

lungs were filled with hot seawater. His father had sat by his bed for days, helping him sit up and breathe.

Stoick wasn't here, was he? Hiccup peeked around the room without moving his head.

No, Stoick wasn't in the room.

But there was definitely someone on the roof. More than one someone.

Was Stoick on the roof, too? What was he doing up there?

Was he with Odin?

How was he going to tell Odin that he didn't want to die yet? Is that a conversation he could have?

Hiccup looked up at the window, which was now definitely open.

A dragon poked his head into Hiccup's room.

Odin's a dragon?

Okay. Hiccup could figure out how to talk to Odin in that case. He started to sit up.

The dragon took a slow, cautious scan around the room, sniffing and looking into each corner, then pulled his head back out of the window.

Wait, Odin looked like Toothless?

What was going on?

Hiccup closed his eyes, dizzy and very confused. He laid back down, slowly.

Odin and Toothless were on the roof.

What should he do now?

Hiccup heard a growl. Maybe Toothless was about to fight with Odin. Oh, no. That wouldn't end well.

He heard Toothless murmur and grunt in annoyance, and then the dark hands reappeared.

Hiccup had to get up and stop the fight.

Then, the dark figure's head reappeared. Oh, Gods. This really wasn't good.

The figure looked around, then somersaulted into the room, flipping its body down and through the window, landing softly on its feet.

Then it tried to stand up, got a foot caught in the folds of its cloak and fell down. Hiccup watched it stand up quickly, posture ready for battle.

Whoever it was stood about as tall as Hiccup. If it was clumsy like him, was he looking at himself? How had he gotten out of bed?

The figure remained still, covered in a long grey cloak, slightly crouched in the middle of the room.

It didn't look like Odin, at leastâ€¦ Hiccup didn't think it was Odin.

Hiccup stared at it. Was he supposed to get up and fight?

Whoever it was, they had to wait for him to sit up again. That might take an hour.

Hope whoever it was would be patient. It'd be a short enough battle as it was.

Then the figure turned. It looked likeâ€¦ a girl.

Freya?

If it was Freya, no way he could fight her. Did she bring her cats? Was that who Toothless was fighting with?

"No, not Freya," the figure answered.

Oh, no. She could read his mind. Hiccup tried to empty his spinning mind of any thoughts that might insult her, but another idea jumped in front of the chaos he was trying to suppress.

"Lofn? Hah." The figure sounded...wary?

That wasn't right. Neither Freya nor Lofn would be wary. They'd gather some cats and kick him into Valhalla without a second thought.

"Go back to sleep, Hiccup," the figure said. He closed his eyes, but he didn't want to fall asleep if whoever it was had plans to take him somewhere he didn't want to go.

"Oh, for â€¦ Odin's ghost, Hiccup. I'm not taking you anywhere."

"Astrid?"

"Quiet! Not so loud!"

Another grunt on the roof, and Toothless' head appeared. He rumbled low at Astrid, who had removed her hood and was standing in the curve of sunshine that poured into the room around Toothless.

If the sun was coming in through that window, it was later than he thought. Had he slept all day?

"Ok, Toothless. I'm hurrying."

Astrid crossed the room quietly, stood alongside the bed, and glared down at him.

"You've been sick for days. I was worried."

"Days?"

"Almost a week."

"I've only been in bed a few hours."

"Nope. Days. Stoick says you're getting better but Iâ€¦." Astrid swallowed hard, visibly uncomfortable, like she battled back words away from her mouth.

"Is Odin on the roof?"

"Odin?" Astrid's eyes widened. "Oh, Gods, are you dying?"

Astrid sat down in a rush of movement and put her hand on Hiccup's face, her fingertips brushing his hair back.

"No, don't think so. Don't let Toothless fight Odin, though."

"Toothless brought me to the roof. He held me by the window so no one would see me drop in."

Hiccup laughed weakly. "You did drop in."

"Very funny." Astrid smiled, though her voice was less gentle.

Hiccup closed his eyes a moment.

Astrid's hand was cool against his skin. It stilled the confusion chasing itself in his mind, smoothing it out like the surface of the pond in the cove. He turned his head toward her palm slightly, seeking more comfort.

Hiccup reached out, found her other hand resting on her lap, and grasped it tightly for a moment. She squeezed his fingertips.

"Go back to sleep. Clearly you're not dying."

"Don't think so."

"See you tomorrow, maybe?"

"Ok." Hiccup felt himself descending beneath the surface of the cool pond water, his face still turned toward her hand. Her fingertips lightly stroked his forehead, moving damp hair away from his face so the cool breeze of the open window could reach his skin.

Astrid was in his room. Wait, really? She was?

He peeked at Astrid's face through his lashes.

Oh, Gods.

Or, Goddesses.

Lofn.

Lofn was standing behind Astrid.

He should tell her, so she didn't accidentally offend a goddess by not acknowledging her correctly.

"Don't worry, Hiccup. There's no one here. I'm going in a minute. Go to sleep."

Hiccup tried to tell Astrid again about Lofn. Toothless could give Lofn a ride to wherever she was going if she didn't have her chariot. Did Toothless like cats?

He heard Astrid laugh, a whisper of sound. Maybe Lofn was talking to Astrid. They would be ok. He trusted her.

As he slid beneath the surface, closer and closer to the cool, dark sleep he needed, he felt Astrid lean over him.

He felt her kiss on his forehead, gentle and firm.

...

Astrid pulled the hood back over her head, and softly called Toothless' name. Toothless's head appeared in the window. He looked annoyed.

"I know, I know. I'm coming out now."

Toothless swung his tail down through the opening, and Astrid wrapped her arms and legs around it, carefully avoiding the mechanism of his tailfin.

She looked back at Hiccup. She remembered how he had looked after the Great Battle, pale and still, unresponsive in his bed for so long it made her shiver to think about it. He was pale now, but she didn't feel that chill of fear. He'd get better.

As she was slowly lifted into the air out the window, she heard Hiccup whisper something. She tapped her hand on Toothless' tail to get him to stop moving.

"What, Hiccup?"

His lips moved but she couldn't hear him. She wasn't going to drop down into his room again. She was already at greater risk of getting caught - which would not be good for any of them, including Hiccup, even though clearly wasn't all that aware of anything.

Still, she wanted to know what he'd said. She reached up and grabbed the window ledge to take some of her weight off Toothless' tail.

"What did you say, Hiccup?"

His lips parted, and he took a slow breath in. He spoke, in a whisper, very few words.

But Astrid could only make out the last one.

"...you."

12. Chapter 12 - Fabric and Leather

****Fabric and Leather****

Four days later...

* * *

><p>Hiccup was not entirely well, but he had enough energy to walk to the forge. And if he didn't, well, he was going anyway. It wasn't far, and he'd get there eventually.<p>

He'd had more than enough of being in bed. He was bored out of his mind. He didn't have enough energy to fly, but he had some, and the forge was as good a place as any. It wasn't his room, or his bed, and that was enough.

When he arrived, the forge was empty. But shortly afterward, Gobber caught him trying to sharpen one of the tools used for sheep shearing and nearly knocked Hiccup across the room.

"What're ye doing? You're not supposed to be out of bed, Hiccup. Does Stoick know you're here?"

"Dad does not know I'm here, but I'm not staying in bed. I'm well enough to stand upright."

Gobber shook his head, his trailing whiskers twitching with his irritation. "You can't lift a hammer, not right now, anyway. You can't even hone a blade properly. You're going to do more harm than good. Go back to bed."

"No. There are things I can do. Where are we on saddles? Who needs one?"

Gobber muttered about stubborn vikings and Thor, and pushed Hiccup to the desk he used in the back.

"Go sit back there, and don't cause any trouble. I mean it. Stay out of my way and I won't tell Stoick. But if he finds you here and starts bellowing about it, you're on your own."

"Gobber--"

"SIT. There. NOW."

Hiccup rolled his eyes and went back to his desk.

Was the forge always this big? His desk seemed farther away.

Gobber didn't see him collapse onto the low bench, but he heard the noise.

"Told you so."

"Ok, Gobber," Hiccup replied.

Hiccup picked up charcoal and flipped through the drawings on his table. Counting backwards, he realized he hadn't been at the forge, or out of bed, for nine days. No wonder he didn't recognize some of the drawings. He hadn't seen them for so long, it was like looking at someone else's work.

He was soon engrossed in altering one of his designs, wondering what he'd been thinking when he'd drawn the straps in that configuration. He redrew the saddle, added a storage compartment on the side where there was empty space that could be made useful, and was about to show it to Gobber when he heard voices from the next room.

"So, what would you use then?"

Astrid?

"Well, that's a mite tricky. The trouble is, you have to join the two sides such that the strengths of one won't harm the other."

What was she talking to Gobber about?

"Right. And if the stitching is too small, it'll pull through the fabric."

"Exactly," Gobber replied. The way he rolled his words through his throat meant he was drawing on years of knowledge to figure something out. He practically chewed on words while he was thinking.

"What if someone needed to add a piece of wool or something to the underside of a saddle?"

"Why would someone need to do that? Something wrong with Stormfly?"

"Oh, no, not me. Not for me. I'm just wondering, because, uh, we were flying yesterday and it seems like it might make a difference in, um, the way the saddle would fit."

"Nah, nothing like that. Between the leather of the saddle and the dragon hide, the fabric wouldn't stand a chance. It would wear out before you got home the first day."

"Ah," she said. "What do you use to join things to leather, out of curiosity?"

"Well, usually sewing anything to leather requires special needles."

"Needles? Like Nadder quills?"

"Nah, not strong enough. You need metal. But Astrid, if your saddle needs repair, bring it in. We'll fix it."

"Oh, no, my saddle is fine."

Hiccup couldn't see Astrid, but he could see Gobber leaning on the large work table, tools and scraps stacked behind him. What on earth were they talking about?

He wanted to go in the room and ask, but he had a feeling he'd learn

more if he didn't. Maybe Astrid was up to somethingâ€|.

"Why don't you tell me what you're trying to make, Astrid, and I'll see what I can do to help you out?"

"Oh, no, like I said, it's not something for me. I'm just...curious."

Hiccup could hear in her voice that she was lying.

So could Gobber. Astrid was many things, but a good liar was not one of them.

"Well, not much else I can tell you, then. The best way to figure out how to join two different things is to try different options once you have the two things what need to be joined."

"Right. That makes sense. Thanks, Gobber." Astrid ducked out the side door and left in a hurry.

"What was that about?" Hiccup asked when he was sure Astrid had gone.

"Well, I don't rightly know, to be honest," he said. "She was asking about joining fabric to leather, but couldn't tell me for what. She'll be back for some help, though. Sewing leather is always tricky."

Hiccup leaned against the table, frowning.

"Joining leather to fabric."

"Aye. That's what she said."

Hiccup turned and went back to his desk, taking a few extra sheets of paper with him.

What was Astrid trying to do with leather and fabric?

And if he asked, would she tell him?

13. Chapter 13 - Winter's Flirting

****Winter's Flirting****

That same eveningâ€|

* * *

><p>Each year on Berk, winter would begin to sneak in at sundown. The days would seem mild, but the darkness would grow progressively colder until the daytime finally gave up and agreed it was time for winter. And then, day or night, everyone's chest would hurt when they breathed.<p>

That evening, as he left the forge once the sun had set, the air was clear enough that every star in the heavens shone at once.

And, in Hiccup's opinion, they were all saying, unanimously, "Why are

you outside? It's cold!"

Winter was once again flirting with Berk.

The change of seasons had not made much difference to Hiccup before Toothless. But now, he met the changes with disappointment. He had always liked Snoggletog and appreciated the peace that came to Berk once the ice held the ocean in stillness and lessened the likelihood of attack, but winter now meant less freedom. Shorter days and winter storms meant less opportunities to fly. And it meant slower flights when he could leave the ground, since he and the other riders would have to wear a lot more layers.

But winter also meant bigger fires in the great hall, with half, if not most, of the village warming the air with stories and songs - and increasingly drunken versions of both as the night progressed.

Hiccup wasn't feeling entirely better, but he didn't feel like sleeping, either. He wasn't feverish, and though he coughed a bit, especially in the cold and almost painful air outside, he was well enough to attend that evening's council meeting with his father.

To Stoick, Hiccup suspected, the freezing of the ocean meant freedom, but also great worry. Once the ice froze, Stoick's job focused on Berk and keeping everyone within it alive and safe. But in the weeks before the freeze, he was unstoppable in his concern and attention. The meeting had been entirely focused on fishing, late harvests, and on storing food for winter. How many ships could go out before the ice arrived, and how many days did they have left before they were locked into harbor? Was there enough dried fish this year?

Hiccup had been attending these meetings for two years, but he never had much to add. He sketched and listened, and sometimes wrote down observations to share with his father later, such as the time he'd noticed Olaf's brother, Stafgaard, glaring at Stoick through most of the meeting. Stoick had paid him a visit afterward, hoping to eliminate any threat of a challenge from Stafgaard's family, and learned in that conversation of a number of problems they'd been unwilling to bring to his attention for some, in Hiccup's opinion anyway, rather stupid political reasons.

Hiccup's strength in those meetings, or so he thought, was that he listened, and watched, but rarely spoke. Being the chief was his father's job, and his father was so perfectly suited to it, Hiccup didn't think there was much he needed to do. Stoick remembered the sequence of life in Berk perfectly. He knew what needed to happen when, and he kept the village running so that for the present and immediate future, things were safe for everyone - as safe as Vikings typically were, anyway. Hiccup didn't have much to add to his father's expertise.

So it was a huge shock to him when his father turned to him and asked, "How many days do you think until the ice sets?"

Hiccup blinked at his father, and felt the eyes of everyone on the council turn to him. That feeling of wanting to shrink never fully went away, even though those who were looking at him weren't angry at him for yet another mishap, and hadn't been for years.

An answer was expected, but Hiccup knew his father would wait. Since the Great Battle, Stoick listened to him, and, more importantly, gave him space to think of what he wanted to say. Hiccup didn't have his father's gift for knowing the right words and always having them ready.

"Last year, it was early. There was already ice on the rocks by now."

"Aye," Stoick said. "We're close, but there's no ice yet."

Hiccup frowned, thinking backwards in time, which he didn't often do. This time last year, he and Toothless had been exploring the waters south of Berk, andâ€|.

"Hang on," he said, standing abruptly. He was barely taller than all the other men sitting down, but he could see over their heads. That was different from last year, he thought.

"Hey, Fishlegs!"

Fishlegs, across the room with Ruffnut and Tuffnut, nearly fell backwards off his bench at hearing his name called from the council table. He approached the group cautiously.

"Y-yeah? What do you need, Hiccup?"

"Last year, when winter came early, you said something about Meatlug and your fireplace. What was it?"

"Fireplace? Oh, yes! Yes, indeed. Meatlug, she's so smart, she kept firing at the hearth long after it would have gone out. She kept it going all night. We didn't know why, but the next morning, it had snowed - remember?"

"Aye," Stoick said. "The early storm last year. Too much snow, way too early."

Hiccup remembered that storm very clearly. It had left behind snow drifts taller than Toothless. He turned to Fishlegs.

"So Meatlug knew to keep the fire going that night?"

"Yes, I think she did."

"Anything like that yet this year?" Hiccup kept his voice calm, because Fishlegs looked ready to keel over the longer he stood addressing the council.

"N-no, not yet, but if it happens again, I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Fishlegs. Hey, have you seen Astrid?"

"N-n-no, not since this afternoon. Sorry." Fishlegs turned and scurried to the corner, as far away from the council as he could get. Hiccup watched Ruffnut and Tuffnut warily approach him, looking as shocked as Fishlegs that he'd spoken to the council. If they only knew how boring it was, Hiccup thought to himself.

"So the dragons might give us a sign that a storm is here?" Olaf asked, his knitting keeping his hands busy. Hiccup nodded at Olaf.

"More than one, if we pay attention. They did last year," Hiccup replied. "I didn't realize it until after, but they were definitely preparing for that storm."

Hiccup looked around the room for Astrid while he spoke. He began to climb up on the bench to see better when Stoick, still sitting, spotted her.

"Astrid. Come here a moment, please," Stoick said. His voice brought the entire great hall to a complete halt.

Stoick was calling Astrid to council.

Hiccup shook his head at his father. Stoick was never subtle.

Astrid approached the group calmly, though Hiccup could see her fingers were nearly white around the cup she held.

"What's...going on?"

It was not at all expected for a woman to be called to council, especially not a teenager without her father or mother to stand with her.

Hiccup explained what they were discussing.

"Last year, you told me that Stormfly began preparing her nest early, right?"

"Oh, yeah." Astrid relaxed a tiny bit as she answered Hiccup's question. "She started building it even when the sun was still up long past meal time. Then, before I knew it, boom, early winter."

"What did she do?"

"Well, she added branches and straw as usual, but then she also added some cloth. She took my scarf, and some scraps of wool, too."

One of the Vikings on the other side of the table spoke up. "I don't have a Nadder, but my dragon builds a nest each year, too. He's just started it."

Hiccup nodded slowly, then turned back to Astrid.

"Do you know if Stormfly has begun building up her nest yet?"

Astrid thought a moment, and took a sip from her mug.

"No, I don't think so. But if I notice her adding layers to it, I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Astrid. That would be a big help."

"No problem." Astrid smiled at him and walked away as Hiccup began to explain what the dragons' behavior meant.

â€|

Though she didn't want to show it, Astrid was unnerved at being asked to spontaneously address the council. But as she moved toward the fire to warm her hands, which were ice cold and shaking a bit, she looked over her shoulder to watch Hiccup.

He was explaining how the dragons might give them signals about changes in the weather, such as a storm approaching, and how they could each watch their own dragons for indications that winter had arrived, and that the sea ice was about to set in for good. He was as focused as he was during dragon training, when he explained how to anticipate a dragon's actions and respond accordingly.

Hiccup looked so much like his father, too: brows down, both hands gesturing in the air to explain what he was saying. Even Stoick, who sat next to him, was listening intently as Hiccup told them what signs to look for.

As conversations restarted around the great hall, Astrid could see others realizing what she had known for a long time.

Hiccup was going to be a great chief one day.

14. Chapter 14 - Racing the Ice

****Racing the Ice****

The next day, every available advanced dragon rider, including the original group of six, rode out to look for sea ice, and to begin measurements of its progress. Hiccup's theory, which he shared with his father after the council meeting and with the riders that morning, was that if they could identify where the ice advanced more quickly, and how fast it moved across the surface of the sea, they'd have a better idea of exactly when fishing and sailing out of Berk would cease for the winter. Better to ride out and look for the ice while they could than to wait for the ice to show up, Hiccup explained.

Stoick, wrapped entirely in preparations for winter, agreed it would be good information to have for that year and future years, and set Hiccup and the others on the task that afternoon.

Hiccup, though he couldn't say as much to anyone, was glad for a day away from the forge. He'd be there most of the winter, and it wouldn't be awful, given that the forge always had a fire going. But he missed flying, especially after being ill for so long.

Toothless was equally ecstatic to have a long ride ahead of him, and tossed Hiccup up onto his saddle after they finished getting ready.

"Hiccup," Astrid asked quietly, so the others wouldn't hear. He had to lean down toward her to hear. "Are you sure you're well enough to ride this far?"

"Yeah," he replied, not bothered at all by her asking. Not many people asked after his health. Most people, like Gobber or Stoick,

yelled at him as a way of showing they cared. He didn't mind the more rare question asked out of soft concern.

Particularly not from Astrid.

"I've got a version of a new helmet I'm working on, and it covers my face so the cold air shouldn't hurt." "See you later, then. When I beat you back to the island."

"Beat me? Not a chance."

"I will beat you, and by so much time, I'll be able to light the fire in your house before you've landed."

Hiccup had no idea what to say to that. He stared at her, confused. Astrid, embarrassed beyond all possible measurement, walked over to Stormfly to check her saddle and the attachment behind it that held her axe.

Within a few moments, every dragon and rider were airborne and headed in different directions. Each of them had a route to follow from Berk, some hugging the coast and others straight out to sea. Using compasses and copies of Hiccup's map, they were to fly until they saw ice, mark the location as best they could on the map, then approximate the time it took them to return to Berk from that point. Hiccup would take all their reports and measurements and try to draw a master diagram of the ice and its progress toward Berk. Then, in a week, they'd fly out again, repeating the process until the ice was close enough that they didn't need to measure its progress any longer.

The twins and Fishlegs headed off in one direction, because trusting Ruff and Tuff to remember directions was a bad idea, but relying on Fishlegs to fly further than usual wouldn't be effective either. The twins would push Fishlegs past his usual boundaries, but Fishlegs would remember to mark the map once they spotted ice.

Snotlout and some of the younger riders flew off toward the forest to start their search on the sea that bordered the other side of the island. Astrid, Hiccup, and some of the riders from last year's class headed straight out from the harbor, beginning at the same point but angling their flight paths enough that within moments, they were flying away from each other, and from Berk.

It didn't take long to find ice. The north wind blew large chunks of it into the sea, and worked to chill the surface until it became solid. That wind was pushing toward Berk with every intention of reaching it soon. The two younger riders who headed out to sea, Balder and his cousin, Gunvor, found ice within an hour's flying, and turned their dragons around to mark the time back to Berk.

Astrid wasn't much more than an hour away when she saw the first chunks of white floating in the sea, and she and Stormfly flew large arcs to their left and right to try to see where the line of ice began, and how it held together as the sea and the wind pushed winter closer to Berk. The ice's progress followed a wavering line, and she began to mark different points of her map using a compass and the amount of time they'd been flying.

Stormfly crowed at a particularly large block.

"It is big, you're right about that," Astrid replied. "But the ice seems to be on schedule. No surprise early winter for us this year."

Stormfly shook her head, her quills vibrating in the cold wind, and called out loudly as they flew down to the largest block of ice, circled it once, then rose back into the sky to fly back to Berk.

The afternoon sun was sliding toward the horizon behind them as they flew, and the air was clear and cold. Astrid ducked down as Stormfly picked up speed, but raised her head in surprise when she saw Toothless and Hiccup approaching from their right.

It was race time. For sure.

Then she saw Hiccup wave to her.

She and Stormfly leveled off alongside Toothless, who greeted Stormfly with a happy growl.

Hiccup removed his helmet, his hair in epic disarray.

"The air is so clear, sound carries farther than I expected. I heard Stormfly's calls but you were nowhere in sight."

"Yeah, she found some huge pieces of ice in the sea. Didn't you, girl?"

Hiccup looked back at the sea over his shoulder. "Amazing."

"I didn't see you until just now. You could hear us from that far away?"

"Yeah. The sound of her voice carried over the water, I guess. It was like you were right next to us. Scary."

"Wow," Astrid said, then frowned at him. "Wait, why would that scare you?"

"It was so close. Like you were right next to me. I didn't expect that."

"...and?" Astrid frowned at him. Why would that be scary?

"I wasn't worried, Astrid. Anything that comes your way, you can more than handle it."

"This is true," Astrid said. "But you should be worried anyway."

"I should? Why?" Astrid nudged Stormfly with her ankles.

"Because I'm so going to beat you home. See you back on Berk!"

She dropped low in her saddle, and Stormfly dove down toward the water, then picked up speed as they flew. Stormfly's wings pushed them faster and faster through the icy air. The wind became a roar in her ears, and Astrid could feel her braid trailing behind her in the wind.

Within a few seconds, Toothless and Hiccup were alongside her, then above her, flying upside down above their heads. Astrid looked up over her shoulder and Hiccup waved at her.

"Are you kidding me?" She shouted at him.

Hiccup's helmet was on, obscuring his face, but she could see his eyes. He was smiling down at her.

If she sat up, she could smack him on the head.

But before she could reach up and whack him, Toothless tucked his wings and spun off to Astrid's left, down toward the water. Stormfly chased them, diving around Toothless as they spiraled through the air, increasing their speed.

Astrid could hear Hiccup laughing as Toothless teased Stormfly, and when Stormfly flew low over Toothless, Astrid reached down over Stormfly's wing with her axe handle and tapped Hiccup on the head, knocking his helmet askew.

"Hey!" He moved the helmet back into position and glared at her.

"Aw, poor, stubborn, hard-headed viking. Are you all right?"

"You are so going to pay for that."

They dove and twisted, trying to interfere with one another's flight path as their dragons tried to increase speed. Riders and dragons both called out to one another with laughter and snarls, and the sound carried on the water around them.

Then Toothless and Hiccup took off into the sky, going straight up toward the clouds.

"We've got him this time, Stormfly," Astrid shouted as they flew low across the water, picking up speed. She didn't know what Hiccup was thinking, but this race was theirs to win. Flying up meant they'd have to fly farther, whereas she could just make out the buildings on the island up ahead. Stormfly's wings cut through the air, and the cold was no match for their speed.

Then, she felt a sharp tug on her braid just as Toothless and Hiccup twisted past them, plummeting toward the sea in a spiral.

"Got you!"

"Hey! Hiccup!"

Toothless threw open his wings, and they slowed immediately. Hiccup and Toothless turned toward Berk, flying directly underneath Stormfly in the narrow space between her claws and the water below.

Astrid and Hiccup crossed their finish line, the two fire sentries off the rocky coast of Berk, at the same moment, leaving a thin trail of mist behind them.

15. Chapter 15 - Extra Time

****Extra Time****

Astrid and Hiccup approached Berk from the sea, and the view of their home from above, draped in evening mist illuminated by flickering fire light, never failed to remind Astrid of the first time she flew on the back of a dragon. She looked over to where Hiccup and Toothless were gliding through the night air.

His helmet was pushed back from his face, his eyes were closed, and he was laughing as Toothless rose and fell over currents of air only he could feel, causing Hiccup to lift and drop onto his saddle. Astrid watched as he opened his eyes and saw the village below them.

Either Hiccup had the same thought, or he felt her attention, because he looked over at her, and smiled.

Astrid flew Stormfly closer to Toothless so she could talk to Hiccup without shouting.

"Have all the others landed?"

"I think so," Hiccup replied.

They circled Berk, spotting Snotlout and Fishlegs heading toward the great hall, and the twins wrestling in the grass while their dragon watched them. They didn't see the others, but they could see their dragons, having dinner by the stables and chasing one another. Young riders, and equally young dragons, were rather predictable. Flight, then food.

"Everyone's back, I think," Astrid said, counting the dragons she could spot from above.

"Yeah," Hiccup replied quietly.

"What's wrong?"

"I haven't flown in over a week, and I don't want to land," he said with a wry grin.

"So, let's not." Then Astrid tilted Stormfly into a dive toward the sea, flying low over the docks toward the cliffs where the sea curled into the island.

Hiccup and Toothless followed, gliding silently through the air behind her. They flew straight up the cliff walls, over the forest, then back over the water to circle around Berk.

Astrid and Stormfly headed inland, and Hiccup and Toothless followed, trying to stay on her tail and match her flight path exactly. Astrid caught on and began twirling with Stormfly, going up then circling down in reverse spirals, laughing when she saw Toothless keeping up perfectly with a huge grin on his face, his tongue out and eyes gleaming in the dark.

"Hey, Toothless!"

He grunted at her, speeding up a bit.

"Want to play catch?" Astrid pulled a leather ball she'd stuffed with wool out from the weapons storage bay in her saddle and tossed it into the air.

Toothless dove for it, tapped the ball with his foot to keep it airborne, then reared back and smacked it forward with his tail.

"Nice one, bud!"

The ball sailed forward and Stormfly raced after it. The ball started to plummet toward the trees, but Stormfly rolled below it and tipped it with her wing, allowing Astrid to grab it. She then threw it behind her at Hiccup as hard as she could.

Hiccup yelped in surprise but he caught the ball. He caught it with his head and his hands, Astrid noted, but he caught it.

He rose up on his knees in his saddle, and tossed it toward Astrid, but so lightly it barely cleared Toothless' nose.

"Here you go, Toothless," he said. With a happy growl, Toothless curved around and slapped the ball directly at her with his wing.

"Hey!" Stormfly tipped the ball up with her quills, and Astrid grabbed it easily.

"Are we keeping score?" Hiccup had to shout to be heard.

"We are now," Astrid yelled, then gave a battle cry. She turned quickly and moved her arm as if she was going to throw it, then ducked at the last minute and tossed the ball in the opposite direction .

"So not fair!" Hiccup called to Astrid.

"Says who?" Astrid yelled back.

Hiccup and Toothless dove for the ball, which was headed for the water below the cliffs.

"I don't think you're going to make it," Astrid gloated. "Point for me!"

"Not a chance," Hiccup yelled back. "Now, bud!"

Toothless lowered his head and fired a short blast at the cliff wall below them. Rocks exploded outward from the cliff wall, and the ball ricocheted off several, changing its trajectory and slowing it down enough that Hiccup could grab it as Toothless spread his wings and tail to stop their downward plummet, curving his body to spiral away from the rocks.

"Nice job, Toothless," Astrid yelled down to them from where she and Stormfly hovered above them.

"What, nothing for me?" Hiccup tucked the ball under his arm and they

flew back above the treetops. Astrid and Stormfly rode alongside them.

"Nope, that was all Toothless."

Hiccup scoffed at her, rolling his eyes.

"Your dragon makes you look good, and you know it."

Astrid was joking, but she saw Hiccup's eyes widen briefly before he hid his reaction behind his usual bemused expression. She cursed herself.

"We still playing?"

"Yup." Astrid slid sideways on her saddle, her legs dangling over Stormfly's left wing as they flew side by side. "You're not going to beat us, right, Stormfly?"

Toothless scoffed at that, which Stormfly did not appreciate. She squawked at him, pretending to aim her quills in his direction.

"I'm not sure this game is good for their morale," Hiccup said. There was laughter in his voice but to Astrid's ears, it sounded vaguely strained. She cursed herself again, knowing that no matter what his accomplishments, Hiccup would carry doubt that he was really all that extraordinary, given that the dragons, in his opinion, were far more incredible than himself. That's not how Astrid saw it, but that didn't matter. Hiccup was, like all of them, still adjusting to the ways in which he'd changed his own world, and he didn't always know how he was perceived by the people in it.

Astrid also knew that compliments were likely to make Hiccup fly off and hide for hours. She felt the same way. She could battle people for hours with endless weaponry, but when they said something nice about her, she had no idea what to do with herself.

Looking out over the forest toward the springs, she had an idea.

"Hiccup! Follow me!"

She shifted into a flying position in her saddle and whispered to Stormfly. Then, with a sweep of her wings and the rush of the winter wind, they were off, Toothless and Hiccup right behind them.

16. Chapter 16 - Warmer Surprises

****Warmer Surprises****

Hiccup and Toothless flew behind Stormfly and Astrid, following in their tailwind, which allowed Toothless to glide more, and allowed Hiccup to think.

Trouble was, he didn't want to think, not right then. He wanted the wind to sweep through his mind and carry out all the little bothersome thoughts and questions that were crowding around one another, distracting him from enjoying what he had in that moment. Air, freedom, quiet, time with Toothless, and time with Astrid.

He definitely didn't want to think about that last part too much, not while she was with him.

Astrid and Stormfly flew over the hot springs, past the clearing where she practiced and beyond the edge of the forest, farther than Hiccup had walked in years. Then, with little warning, they dove over a cliff edge so steep they seemed to disappear from view.

"Where are they going? Do you know?" Toothless had no answer, but followed behind Stormfly, his head down, sniffing the air, eyes narrowed.

"Down here! Hiccup! Toothless!"

Below them, Astrid and Stormfly had landed on a low ridge of dark, flat rock that formed a sort of lip to that side of the island. She waved at them, and Toothless swung around to land behind her. It was wide enough for both dragons and their riders, but not much larger than that. Toothless landed carefully behind Stormfly.

But as soon as he touched the rock, Toothless jumped back up, his wings flapping, a hiss sounding from deep in his mouth.

"Whoa, what's wrong, bud?" Hiccup stood in the stirrups as Astrid stepped forward toward them.

"It's ok, Toothless. It won't hurt," Astrid said, reaching up to him. Behind her, Stormfly shook her head and wings, lowering her body to the rock to sit.

Toothless looked up at Hiccup, then looked at Astrid and Stormfly, still hovering above the rock. He growled, not menacingly, but not happy either.

"I promise, Toothless. It won't hurt him. See? I'm fine." She jumped up and down in place, then reached down and touched the rock with her bare hand. "It's ok. I promise."

Toothless huffed and shook his head, then landed, gently. He lowered his body so Hiccup could slide down from his saddle.

"What was that about?" Hiccup looked at Astrid, but she didn't hear him.

She was still talking quietly to Toothless.

"Toothless. Come on. Don't you know I would never hurt Hiccup?" He snorted sharply in reply.

"You know that, right?" She reached up and scratched behind his cheek, which made him grin, a low roar rolling in his throat like a purr. "That's what I thought."

Hiccup watched them, not sure of what to say.

Then he realized. His right foot was warm. Really warm. He stepped back, leaning on his left leg.

"Whoa! It's hot!"

"Yeah, the whole rock stays warm. I think it's connected to the same water that feeds the hot springs. It's never cold over here."

Hiccup reached down to touch the stone, tentatively with his fingertips, then with his palm.

"I noticed it last year, after the early snow," Astrid said, looking around her. "This whole area never had any snow or ice cover, no matter how cold it was. Then I saw steam rising off it one morning, and I had to check it out."

"This is amazing," Hiccup said, touching various parts of the stone beneath them. He moved to stand, but his metal leg slipped from under him. Astrid jumped to grab his arm, but he caught himself. Then he reached down and twisted the cuff of his leg. The normal walking leg he used rose up behind him, and a sharper spike came down instead.

"Whoa, yourself."

"Yeah," Hiccup said, distracted, still looking at the rock. "Helps with the winter ice. I only wear it when it starts to get cold."

Astrid was impressed, and tried not to stare, thought it was difficult not to. The metal piece resembled a curved spear, and it dug slightly into the wet and slippery surface of the rock so Hiccup could pivot and turn without sliding.

She wanted to ask him about it, but was afraid to. Her fear made her realize how many unspoken questions lay between her and Hiccup, questions she was afraid to ask, or afraid to have answered.

Does it hurt?

How did you make it?

Do you remember?

Are you scared sometimes?

Do you remember the day you woke up?

What happens ifâ€¦?

She ruthlessly cut her thoughts off before they could begin to bloom across her face. Toothless saved her with a roar, a loud one.

He fired at the rock beneath him in a small circle, making it even hotter, then curled up on it. Then he let out a groan of happiness.

"I think Toothless has a new favorite spot this winter," Hiccup said with a grin.

Stormfly called out, sounding bothered, and Astrid looked to see what was wrong.

Toothless understood, though. He gestured with his head to move

Stormfly away from where she stood. She squawked at him, and he growled back at her, again telling her to move. Then he fired a blast alongside his tail, next to her feet.

With a happy squawk and a rustle of her quills, Stormfly hopped on the smoking scorch mark, scratched it with her claws, then curled herself onto the smoldering rock Toothless had created for her. She relaxed next to him. They murmured to each other, wiggling every now and again, clearly very, very happy to be relaxed on a slab of hot stone.

"We might never get them out of here," Astrid said.

"I don't blame them. This is amazing. Does anyone else know about this?" Hiccup was still spinning slowly in place. Astrid could see him measuring the distance across, looking up at the cliff above, calculating how far the springs were, and where the water might be.

"Nope, as far as I know, I'm the only one who knows about it. And now you," she added. She stood up and walked over to Hiccup, who was looking out across the water below them, his lips moving slightly.

When he saw her next to him, on his left, his eyes widened in horror. He jumped back away from her.

"What's wrong?" Astrid asked, stung by his reaction to her being near him.

"The spike, it's really sharp," Hiccup said, reaching down to switch back to his walking leg. "You wereâ€¦ I mean, I don't - I don't want to hurt you."

Astrid saw his cheeks begin to turn red. She smiled at him.

"Thanks."

He nodded, looking around, at the ground, up at the cliffs, anywhere but at her.

She knew the feeling.

"You should sit," she said. She tugged his hand as she sat down cross-legged on the stone. "So you don't fall off."

17. Chapter 17 - Quiet Time

****Quiet Time****

Hiccup sat down next to Astrid, curling his right leg under him, leaving his left bent so that the metal rested on the rock in front of him. Astrid leaned back on her hands, looking up at the winter sky.

"You shouldn't tell anyone about this place," Hiccup said.

"I wasn't planning to, but why not?"

"If word ever reaches Snotlout, he'd be out here naked for days, and-"

"_Ugh_," Astrid shuddered.

Toothless shifted to stretch out on his side, and the ball they'd been tossing at each other slid out from the edge of his saddle. Hiccup moved grab it, but Astrid was faster, stretching across the rock and stopping the ball before it could roll off the edge.

Hiccup watched the bend and flex of her muscles as she grabbed it, but when she turned back, Hiccup looked away quickly, hoping she hadn't noticed.

Astrid grinned and tossed the ball lightly to him, and he caught it easily this time. He turned it over and over in his hands.

"This is really good," he said.

"It's a ball."

"Yeah, but..." His fingers followed the seams as he looked at it closely. "Iâ€| Youâ€|."

Hiccup frowned, looking at the ball, then looked up at Astrid.

"Put your hand over your mouth," he said.

"Wait, what?"

"Put your hand over your mouth a moment. You're not allowed to say anything in response to what I'm going to say."

"Hiccup," Astrid said, exasperated.

"Just do it, please?"

She raised a brow at him.

"Fine, don't."

"What were you going to say?"

"Not telling unless you stop yourself from responding."

"Hiccup!"

He shrugged, trying to look unconcerned, and hoping she didn't notice he had to bite his lips trying not to laugh. She looked really annoyed.

With a big sigh, Astrid agreed. "Fine. Covering my mouth. See?"

She glared at him, but put her fingers over her lips.

"You are really, really talented. With sewing, I mean. And axes, but also sewing."

Her glare grew furious.

"See? This is why I didn't want you to respond." Her eyes narrowed even more and Hiccup could see her face redden.

"That's all."

She continued to stare at him.

"You can move your hand now."

She lowered her hand punched him in the arm.

"Ow!"

"You told me I could move my hand," she replied. Hiccup rubbed his arm, shaking his head at her.

Astrid sat up to look out over the edge of the rock to the water beyond. She was sitting cross-legged like Hiccup, but while he had leaned back on his arms, Astrid rested her arms in her lap, and hunched into herself a little.

"You won't tell, right?"

"Tell who what?"

"Tell anyone that I can sew."

He looked baffled. "No. Of course not. Who would I tell?"

"Justâ€¦." Astrid looked down again. Then took a slow breath.
"Thanks."

Hiccup didn't ask what specifically she was thanking him for, and even though he wasn't sure what she meant, he nodded. The warmth of the rock seeped into him, and he felt himself relaxing, the tension he'd felt earlier draining into the soothing heat.

There was a lot he wanted to say to Astrid, and wished he knew how. Astrid was part of everything that had changed for the better since the Great Battle. His role at the flight academy, his friends, the ways in which he was treated as a useful person instead of as a nuisance, everything that made each day less painful than the ones before. Astrid was the same, but they were, the two of them, different now.

The sea churned and crashed below, and the wind grew colder, but sitting on the edge of his world between Toothless and Astrid, Hiccup felt content and safe.

He glanced over at Astrid and found her looking at him.

"What?"

"Nothing," she said.

He tossed the ball at her suddenly, and she grabbed it with one hand, not even looking away from his face.

"You are lethal," he said.

"Yup," she agreed with a wide smile, an expression so open and joyful, Hiccup's breath caught in his throat. He'd never seen Astrid smile like that.

"Lethal," he repeated.

...

Hiccup and Astrid spent an hour or so on the rock together. They talked about the coming winter, the map they were making, and how to keep flying even when the air was painfully cold. They talked about Berk, how each year was different as they grew older and took on more responsibilities. Then Hiccup did impressions of the most boring council meeting he'd sat through yet, which made Astrid laugh. Hiccup always could imitate Stoick and the other men superbly.

Then he brought up his father calling her to council the night before, saying he was sorry to have startled her - he didn't want to say she had been scared - and that he wished Stoick had thought before calling her name.

"It's ok. He wasn't calling me to talk to me. He was calling me so you could talk to me. That's different."

Hiccup laughed. "Yes, very different. I'm not nearly as scary as he is."

Toothless, who was napping next to Stormfly, chose that moment to snore so loudly that the sound nearly knocked Hiccup and Astrid over. Their laughter woke both dragons up.

Stormfly looked up at the sky and squawked at Astrid.

"Time to go home, girl? I swear, she's like a chaperone," Astrid said, setting the ball aside, wiping her hands on her knees and preparing to stand up. "If I'm out late, she starts squawking at me, and won't fly far from Berk after she sees the torches go out."

"She's protective of you," Hiccup said. "That's a good thing."

"Yeah, but she's bossy, too. Aren't you, Stormfly?"

"Can't imagine where she gets that from."

Astrid reached a hand down to help Hiccup stand, and he took it, allowing her to pull him upright while he pivoted his weight on his metal leg. Too late he remembered that it wasn't the spear, and felt it slip sideways out from under him. Oh, great, he thought - but then he stopped. He didn't fall.

Astrid had caught him, grabbing him around the middle, and setting him back on his right leg, balanced and steady. He looked down at her, his hands on her upper arms, her arms around his waist. She was looking up at him, her eyes wide, lips parted in an easy smile.

"You ok?"

"Yeah," he said, squeezing her arms gently, bringing her a bit closer to him.

He saw her glance at his lips, but he didn't move his gaze from her eyes. They were ice blue, the warmest blue he knew of.

She stepped back, and he wished she hadn't.

"Can't have you falling," she said with a grin.

No. Can't have that_, Hiccup thought to himself.

18. Chap 18 - Leaping Into the Space Between

****Leaping Into the Space Between****

Toothless and Stormfly flew toward Berk in large sweeping arcs, the cold air swirling around their riders as the wind lectured them that it was long past time to be home.

"One last game?" Astrid called over her shoulder to Hiccup, who was behind her.

"Uh, oh. What now?"

"Ready, girl?" She leaned down and tapped Stormfly's wings twice with her hands.

Stormfly shook her quills and spread her wings wide. Her body was straight and steady, level in the wind, her path through the air smooth beneath Astrid.

"All right, Toothless, heads up!"

Toothless figured out what Astrid was going to do before Hiccup did.

So when Astrid jumped up on her saddle, ran down Stormfly's back and leapt into the air between the two dragons, Toothless was ready. He swept low beneath her as she turned in midair, and scooped her up and onto his back.

Hiccup, however, was not ready, and barely had time to open his arms before Astrid landed in them. He grabbed onto her tightly, heart pounding, face white as he glanced down to the sea far below.

"Nice catch," Astrid said with a smile.

"Astrid, don't ever do that again," Hiccup gasped.

She felt his heart through the layers of his clothing, pounding like a dragon's wings at highest speed.

"Aw, did I scare you?"

"Dear Gods, yes. I'm going to have nightmares about this."

Astrid laughed.

"Great job, Toothless!" Toothless tilted his head and answered with a grin and a growl at her. He was definitely laughing at Hiccup.

"Thanks, bud. Appreciate that." Hiccup tried to catch his breath, and wasn't making much progress. "I'm going to have to limit your conversations with Toothless, Astrid. You're a bad influence on him."

Astrid would have taken exception to that, except that as he spoke, he smiled, that wicked half grin she had learned was solely for her, and he tightened his arms around her.

"Toothless and I have an understanding," Astrid replied. "Right, my friend?"

Toothless, wisely, remained silent.

Astrid had landed with her legs to one side, but as they flew onward, she shifted to face forward, bending one leg in front of her across the front of the saddle. Hiccup still had his arms around her, and she leaned back onto his chest, resting her hands on his. His fingers were freezing cold, so she covered them with her own, making sure that her wrist gauntlets blocked the wind from his hands completely.

Toothless and Stormfly didn't seem to be in a hurry to arrive home after that, despite Stormfly's urging Astrid earlier. Toothless growled at Stormfly, and they dove to the left of Berk, flying out over the water along the cliffs, where the land dropped suddenly into the sea.

"Taking the long way, bud?" Astrid felt the vibrations of Hiccup's voice through their clothing, and the unexpected sensation of hearing and feeling him speak made her shiver. Hiccup gently drew her closer to him, into the shelter of his arms.

When they turned back toward Berk, both dragons rose high into the air, and again, their village came into view far below them. The first time, years before, she'd been riding behind Hiccup, her arms around him.

Now, though their positions were reversed, she was still as grateful as she had been then that Hiccup couldn't see her face. She wasn't sure she could hide how she felt.

Then Hiccup leaned forward and shifted the fur and fabric of her hood so he could rest his chin on her shoulder. She felt his arms around her, the warmth of him across her back, the steady rise and fall of his breathing, all of it surrounding her. She fit perfectly into the space he created for her.

Astrid was afraid to move, afraid to breathe, not quite sure what to do or say. Hiccup didn't speak. He and Toothless flew, Stormfly alongside them, and Astrid wondered if she was the only one who felt as if her heart were about to explode.

The lights of Berk grew larger as they approached, and Astrid gave up

worrying about what she should do, and did exactly what she wanted most.

She tilted her head so that it rested against Hiccup's, and savored the warmth and safety of being in his arms.

...

They landed near Hiccup's home, and Astrid slid off Toothless' back to land in the grass. After rubbing Toothless' head and thanking him again for catching her, she reached up to give Hiccup a hand down off his saddle. Hiccup didn't see her at first, as he was disconnecting his harness from the saddle and his leg from the tailfin mechanism. But when he looked up, he smiled, took her hand, swung his leg over and jumped down beside her.

Astrid didn't want to let go of his hand, but she did anyway.

"Thanks, Astrid."

"You're welcome," she said, looking for Stormfly.

"No, for everything." She turned back to face him. "For flying and trying to kill me and then nearly killing yourself, and...and all of that. Thank you."

Astrid smiled at him.

"You're welcome. And you don't have to thank me. I love flying as much as you."

Then, without meaning to, she said out loud the words she meant to keep to herself.

"You're the best part of Berk, Hiccup."

He stared at her, surprised. Astrid was shocked at herself, too.

"You know, after Stormfly."

"Of course," Hiccup replied, his face serious, and yet still mocking her.

She started to turn to walk down the hill when Toothless, with absolutely no subtlety, turned his head and pushed her straight into Hiccup.

His arms closed around her tightly again, the way they had when he caught her. Only this time, she faced him.

"Sorry - Toothless, he-"

Hiccup held her for a moment. She slowly moved apart from him, and as he let her go, he smiled at her.

"You can crash into me any time, milady."

19. Chapter 19 - Winter Inside and Out

Winter Inside and Out

Winter came, and with it came the ice that locked them into harbor and the grey skies that kept the sun from their faces. Winter was difficult in any year, but the loss of the sun and the ability to travel by air or by sea made it worse.

The light behind the clouds grew dim before it reached full strength, leaving precious little time to accomplish anything. In order to preserve their fuel, most of Berk would gather in the great hall for meals, and to allow the lights of the fire to warm them together.

Then came the sickness. Stuffy noses, coughs and chills were common in the winter as the weather would try infect them inside and out. Usually there were hot remedies and quiet corners for those who were ill, and the fires would burn a little brighter to try to push the winter out of those who carried it within them.

That winter, the sickness was worse. It was as if winter had teamed up with the wind and the ice. Those who were ill sounded like sails with holes poked through them. They coughed long and hard, sounding as if seawater had filled their lungs. They burned as they shivered.

Hiccup remembered when he was much younger having a similar sickness. He knew water and broth had been the only things he'd eaten, and he had tattered memories of his father sitting with him, holding his hand and singing quietly. Hiccup remembered a dream he'd had where he'd gone flying through the clouds on the rising and falling notes. It was one of his earliest memories of his father, a mountain by his bedside, singing and holding his hand.

This year, Hiccup stayed well. But Stoick caught the sickness. One day he was fine, chopping wood and filling the great hall with his voice. The next, he couldn't wake up long enough to get out of bed. He'd open his eyes, then fall back asleep.

Stoick couldn't be in the main hall with the others. It would do no good for those who were ill to see their chieftain pale and shivering, cheeks red and face sweaty from the effort of coughing. So he was at home, and Hiccup had no idea what to do half the time.

He kept the fire burning. He made sure his father had water. He brought in soup. He tried to wake his father to eat some. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and stayed out of the way when the fever made his father swing his fist at anything his dreams told him was a threat.

Hiccup also went down to the great hall to make it seem as if he wasn't concerned, because Hiccup knew that the village would take their cues from him in his father's absence, and he knew they were all worried. So he had to appear as if he wasn't, when inside, he felt as cold and lost as he had when he was a boy, with no singing mountain to guide him home.

He kept records of how long his father was ill, what looked like improvement, and what made it seem like his father's health

worsened.

On the third day of Stoick's illness, when he seemed to do nothing but grow worse, Hiccup went down to the great hall to see if he could collect some ingredients for the cold remedy without anyone noticing. The great hall was filled with people. Coughing people, feverish people, and worried people. Hiccup had stopped outside the door to take a deep breath, but he was not prepared to see more than half of Berk so ill. Or to see so many eyes look at the door with hope, and then look away when it wasn't Stoick.

He tried to look nonchalant, but there was little need. Few people paid attention to him, all their worries focused in dozens of other directions. So he gathered what he needed, and exited out a side door.

"Hiccup," a soft voice said as he walked up the hill. He looked around.

"Over here," the whisper came from his right. Behind the wood pile.

"Astrid? Fishlegs? Why are you hiding behind the woodpile?"

"We didn't want anyone to see us talking to you," Fishlegs said, starting to stand up - then falling on his backside when Astrid reached up and yanked him back down to the ground.

"Part of that is not being seen," Fishlegs," Astrid said.

"Oh, yes. Right."

"Why shouldn't you be seen talking to me?"

"Because then people will ask us questions... about Stoick," Astrid replied.

"Oh," Hiccup replied, glad he'd tucked the ingredients into his vest.

"Is Stoick really sick?" Fishlegs' scared eyes communicated the hope that Hiccup would tell him otherwise.

"Iâ€¦ He's...he's good." Hiccup lifted his hands, then dropped them at his side. He looked at Astrid. If it were just Astrid, he'd tell her. But he wasn't sure he should say anything to Fishlegs.

"So it's not that bad, then," Astrid said, tapping Fishlegs' shoulder with the back of her hand. "Told you."

"Yeah, you're right. I was worked up over nothing. Thanks, Hiccup. Bye, Astrid." Fishlegs stood up and headed back toward the great hall.

Hiccup looked at Fishlegs, disappearing through the door, then at Astrid. "What theâ€¦?"

Astrid's face became serious, like she was about to bury her axe in a far target. "Fishlegs was convinced that Stoick was really sick, since we hadn't seen him in a few days. I told him that he'd just

missed seeing Stoick each time he came to the hall, but he was doubting me."

"Thanks, then. I guess." Hiccup tucked his hands under his arms to keep them warm, and looked down at the wood pile.

"How bad is it really?"

Hiccup looked up at Astrid, letting her see how scared he was.

"Whoa. That bad?"

"I can hear his breathing from my room upstairs. He doesn't wake up, unless he's having a fever dream."

"And you're on your own taking care of him," she said.

"I can't let the villagers see him. It'll frighten them and I'm not...I can't handle that, too."

"On it." Astrid folded her arms like she was planning battle strategy. "Fishlegs and I will spread the word we saw Stoick and deflect questions as much as we can."

Hiccup stared at her, feeling the chains of worry around his chest loosen.

"Thank you."

She smiled at him. "Of course. Go home. We'll cover things here."

The walk back up to his house was warmer than the walk down, and he carried the warmth inside the house with him. It was time to cook.

20. Chapter 20 - Thinking Aloud

****Thinking Aloud****

On the fourth day, Gobber entered their home without knocking. Hiccup had been sitting at the fire, but stood quickly when the door opened.

Gobber didn't say a word. He looked at Hiccup's face, understood the situation immediately, and nodded.

"Aye. More wood."

A few moments later, Gobber brought in some logs from the pile and began splitting them into narrow pieces for kindling. Hiccup was more shocked that Gobber wasn't talking while he worked than that he was chopping logs inside the house.

Gobber stayed for over an hour. Before he left, he went in to see Stoick, who had slept through his visit, even through the wood chopping.

"Wake up, ye great oaf," Gobber said, nudging Stoick with his knee. Stoick didn't respond.

"Should we force him to wake up?"

"I don't think so, no." Gobber used his hand to feel Stoick's forehead, a gesture so careful and yet so fearless it shocked Hiccup.

No one touched Stoick. Even Hiccup, who was always surprised any time that Stoick dropped a hand on his shoulder or hugged him. Stoick didn't touch anyone easily, and Hiccup had never seen anyone else lay a hand on him - except in battle and practice.

"He's hot, but he's not as bad as some. Besides, he's too stubborn to let a winter sickness take him out," Gobber said. Hiccup saw him grimace at the idea, now spoken out loud. He moved some of Stoick's hair back from his forehead and stepped back.

"You need some more help with... the, ah, the tricky parts?"

Hiccup looked blankly at him, but when Gobber gestured, he understood. And Hiccup was too tired to be embarrassed. He did need help. Together, they rolled Stoick to change the linens from under him, and bathed the sweat from his arms and legs as best they could.

"Next time, I'm bringing the shovel attachment," Gobber said, gesturing to his arm, which still sported a large axe head. "Or a lever. A big one, too. That'll lift him up easy."

Hiccup laughed, despite how he felt at that moment.

"All right then," Gobber said. "I'm off. I'll make sure you have enough food up here. Need some more mead?"

"No, no, thanks." Hiccup had never been fond of it, and they had plenty if... when Stoick recovered. "Could you come by tomorrow morning so I can take Toothless out? If I don't give him some flying time, he'll get clumsy."

"Aye, not a problem. I'll be back tomorrow, don't you worry." And with that, Gobber saluted Hiccup with his axe attachment and left.

Quiet rarely scared Hiccup. But after Gobber shut the door, the quiet seemed like Toothless's roar. Then, it receded, and that was worse.

The horrible, raspy wet sound of his father's breathing filled the house and followed him from room to room. Though he didn't enter his father's chamber normally, for the past week he'd been sitting by his side so often, many of his things were in the room. His notebook, charcoals and his knife were on the bedside table, along with pieces of dried fish for Toothless, who also kept him company in Stoick's room when he wasn't making sure the fire hadn't gone out.

Without Gobber in the house, Hiccup found the lack of noise threatening. Quiet was not a sound Stoick could manage. His father was loud. Noisy. A giant who couldn't stand up without causing floors

to whimper in protest. Now he was still, his breathing an ominous whisper.

Hiccup hated it.

So he tried his best to cover the sound.

"Uh, hey, Dad. I'm not sure if you can hear me or not, but I remember when I was sick...I remember hearing your voice."

Toothless purred at him, curious. He curled his massive body alongside Hiccup's chair, and rested his head on the edge of Stoick's bed.

"I'm trying to do what you would do. I never realized how hard it is to pretend everything's ok when everything's really not. I don't know how you do it."

Hiccup picked up one of his drawing pencils, twisting it in his hands.

"I go to the great hall, and everyone looks at the door to see if it's you, if you're coming to fix everything."

Hiccup sighed, looking at his hands.

"They aren't disappointed, really, that it's me, but I'm not you, and you're the one they look to for everything. I'm not even comfortable being looked at for ordinary things, let alone leading the whole village."

He was silent a moment, but the rasp in Stoick's throat made him flinch so he continued.

"I don't know how you do that, how you pretend that everything is fine so that everyone is convinced. I don't even know if you can tell me how."

Toothless murmured at him. Or at Stoick. Hiccup wasn't sure. He kept talking.

"Gobber says those who were the sickest are getting better, but there are more people ill than before. He worries about the children more, but Gothi is also sick. And Mornen. I visit them when I go to the great hall. Gothi recognizes me, but Mornen doesn't seem to know me. Know anyone."

"Did you know I used to visit Mornen? I'm guessing you did. You know everything that goes on here... most of the time," Hiccup said, smiling at Toothless.

Hiccup had several memories of Mornen. She grew many of the plants they used in remedies at her hut far behind the village. Mornen disliked people, and when they were children, Snotlout had told them stories about Mornen luring young boys and girls into her home with promises of sweets, then never letting them out again.

"One time, years ago, Snotlout dared me to go to her house," he told his sleeping father. "Fishlegs said I should bring her a plant, so I did, but I was terrified. I guess I thought Snotlout might be telling

the truth, that she did keep children in the house. I don't know. I was young. Younger, anyway."

"I don't know if I ever told you about that. You were out at sea at the time, and I remember thinking no one would notice I was gone if she did keep me." Hiccup sat back, turning the pencil in his hands.

"Mornen was the scariest thing I had ever seen. And I saw you angry - at me or at someone else - on a fairly regular basis."

...

Mornen was tall and thin where her sister Gothi was short and rounded. When she'd looked down at him from her doorway, Hiccup had felt even smaller than he usually did.

"On a dare, are you, lad?"

He nodded.

"What do you have there? For me?"

Again, Hiccup nodded, holding his hands out. He'd dug the plant out carefully according to Fishleg's instructions, and held the ball of soil cupped in his hands.

"Smart lad. Always bring the earth with you. Come."

She led him to the back of her house, where the door led out to a large garden. There were wood screens and fabric panels protecting the plants there from the sea wind, which was harsh and left salt on everything it touched. The rows were neat and tidy, with various green and yellow leaves and stems reaching for the sky.

"Here, do you think?" Mornen stood over a blank spot, a hole already dug in the ground.

"Did you know I was coming?" _Did she have the sight?_

Mornen snorted. "Saw you coming up the path. Go on, then. Good. You're almost as good as that other one."

"Other one?"

"Aye, the other lad. Up here once a week or more, questions about plants. He's a gifted one."

"Fishlegs?"

"Ah, no. He's got his own. The other - but he'd not like you to know it about him. Come inside."

Hiccup had entered the house, and found two cups and a plate of flat biscuits on the table. Dark brown ones, with lots of sugar on top.

"Sit, lad. Tell me."

"Tell... what?"

"I know your name. You know mine. You know I have a garden and that I haven't any kidnapped children wandering around. Not yet, anyway," she added with a sly grin.

"I'mâ€¦ I'm Hiccup," he said, not knowing what else to add.

"Already knew that."

Hiccup hadn't been sure what to say. Most elders, when they spoke to him, even now, asked after his father, and then said that he'd be a great chief like Stoick one day. Hiccup could always tell they didn't mean it, and were only saying so because it was the proper thing to do.

"Gothi's told me a lot about you, you know. Probably why she lives in the village. Or above it. Gets all the news first."

"Gothiâ€¦ told you?"

"Aye. She also told me you're a smart lad, and you're going to be - ah, no, lad, listen up." She had thumped her fist on the table, and Hiccup jumped. He knew his face had betrayed what he was thinking.

Mornen leaned in closer, and Hiccup fought the urge to lean back.

"Many's a person who will tell you what they think you want to hear. Or what they want to hear themselves say. But you listen now."

Hiccup was frozen in place and didn't think he had much choice in the matter.

"You're a smart lad. Life will be harder because of it. Being smart means being difficult, because you see things, and no one else sees them. Means you're all alone, in your head and out of it."

Hiccup had been completely shocked.

"Why do you think I live up here?"

â€¦

Toothless kept the fire lit all that night. Hiccup added more wood from the pile Gobber had left by the door, which would normally have been enough for over a week, but was dwindling by the time the sky began to lighten.

Hiccup had been talking to his father for hours. He told him about flying, about Mornen and how he wanted her to ride a dragon. She always refused. Yelled her refusal, in fact. He told Stoick some of the things he'd been up to, exploring with the others, and about his map ideas and ways they could use the dragons after the thaw.

In the dark stillness, punctuated only by his father's breathing and the sound of Toothless firing at the hearth, Hiccup let out all the thoughts he normally kept inside his head. He wasn't able to sing to his father, but Hiccup thought maybe his father would hear his voice,

and follow it back from wherever his sickness had taken him.

So he kept talking until he fell asleep by his father's bedside at daybreak, his head resting by Stoick's hand.

21. Chapter 21 - Light and Heavy Burdens

****Light and Heavy Burdens****

When Hiccup entered the great hall late that afternoon, he made sure to relax his face and tried to look as if he wasn't scared that the horrible sound of his father's breathing would suddenly stop. Hiccup had even combed his hair, as the mess of it had been rather incredible. Sleeping half in a chair and half on his father's bed had not been comfortable for the rest of him, either.

As usual, when he entered the great hall, everyone turned to look at him, but he didn't mind. He expected it. It was easier, a little, when he knew what to expect.

He greeted people, asked about their health, and said his father was improving and would be in a nasty temper. It was wasn't quite the truth, but it made people relax. Stoick's temper was legendary, but it was normal. And if people thought he was sick and cranky, they wouldn't come to his house to bother him.

Hiccup wandered over to the far corner, and saw Gothi sitting up in one of the makeshift beds. Her face was turned to the bed next to her, where Mornen slept. Gothi's worry deepened the lines on her face as she watched her sister.

"Hello, Gothi," Hiccup said softly, bowing to her.

She nodded at him, then returned her gaze to Mornen.

"She isn't well, is she?" Gothi looked at him again, a considering expression on her face, and slowly shook her head.

"I'm sorry," Hiccup said. Gothi nodded once, then gestured for him to sit on the edge of Mornen's bed. He looked at her, and she pointed again, this time with the staff she always held in her hand.

Hiccup wasn't sure if it was proper for him to sit there, but Gothi would know. Or, if she knew, she didn't care, and he wasn't going to argue with her. It'd be a one-sided argument, anyway.

He sat on the bed, turned partially toward Mornen, and watched her breathing. It was unsteady, like his father's, but where Stoick had a massive chest to fill with air, Mornen was frail, and her breaths were thin and slow.

To Hiccup, it looked as if her lips were slightly blue. That wasn't good.

"Does she cough?" he asked Gothi.

She paused, then nodded halfheartedly, in a way Hiccup understood. She coughed, but not enough. Hiccup knew that his father had woken him up long ago when he was ill, and made him sit up to cough. Hiccup

couldn't do that for his father - there's no way he'd be able to lift Stoick so often without a catapult - but he listened every moment for Stoick's coughing to start, so he could try.

"What ifâ€¦ do you think if we sat her up?"

Gothi looked at him, eyes narrowing.

"Might help?"

Gothi nodded, her permission given, and Hiccup stood and crossed to the other side of the bed.

"If I lift her, can you place something behind her?"

Gothi nodded, reaching with her staff to pull one of the bed pillows and a blanket closer.

Hiccup knelt by the bed to slide his arms beneath Mornen, and too late realized that what he was doing was highly improper. He shouldn't be touching an elder, and a woman in her bedclothes at that. He didn't know if Gothi and Mornen had any male relatives in the great hall with them, but at that moment, he couldn't ask. It was too late.

He pushed aside his worry and lifted Mornen gently into a seated position. She didn't weigh much at all, and Hiccup could feel the ridges and bones of her back resting in his hands. She wasn't hot, though.

Gothi pushed a pillow, then another, into position, and then rolled up a blanket and used that as well. Hiccup slowly lowered Mornen so she slept in a reclining position, her head higher than her chest. He covered her with the blanket, but then Gothi tapped him on the hand with her staff.

"Oh - I'm sorry." He'd crossed a line without meaning to, and began to stammer further apologies.

But Gothi shook her head. Setting her staff aside, she reached for his hand, and placed it between her own. She traced something on the back of his hand with a fingertip, then pressed her hand into his skin, as if sealing it into place. He didn't know what she'd drawn - his mind was still running in place over the idea that he'd offended Gothi by improperly covering her sister with a blanket.

Gothi smiled, her eyes shrewd. Hiccup wasn't sure what she was doing, but he was relieved she wasn't mad.

Gothi abruptly dropped his hand, and gestured toward the door of the great hall.

"Time for me to go?" She picked up her staff, nodded, and resumed her watch over her sleeping sister.

He looked around, saw that the hall wasn't as full as it had been when he'd come in, and realized it was long past time for him to get home.

The village talked about that moment for weeks afterward. They didn't

see Hiccup lifting a sleeping woman improperly. They saw their future chief caring for one of them, carefully and without hesitation. When he closed the door to the great hall behind him, without knowing it, Hiccup left the room a more peaceful and hopeful place.

22. Chapter 22 - Standing and Sitting

****Standing and Sitting****

When Hiccup arrived home, Stoick was coughing.

He ran to his father's chamber, and tried to roll his father into a seated position. It had been easier to lift Mornen. Stoick was impossible to budge, and he wasn't fully awake.

Then Hiccup felt some of the burden lift.

Toothless had placed his head beneath Stoick's shoulder on the other side of the bed, and was pressing his front legs against the bed frame to push his father upward.

"Thanks, Toothless," Hiccup said between gritted teeth. Moving his father was like moving a mountain, in every respect.

Between them, they lifted Stoick slightly, but they also woke him up. Toothless ducked back quickly, leaving Hiccup with the weight of his father, a weight he was not prepared to carry on his own. But Stoick jerked forward and coughed long and loud. Hiccup kept his hand on his father's shoulder, waiting for the coughing to stop - and hoping that it wouldn't stop too quickly, if it meant his breathing would improve afterward.

Stoick coughed and gasped and coughed some more, a cloth over his mouth. Then his breathing settled. Hiccup saw the sheen of sweat on his father's face and grabbed another cloth to wipe it away. Stoick pulled it out of his hand and ran it over his own forehead and his neck. He was breathing like he'd run to the top of the mountain where the air was thin.

Hiccup kept his hand on his father's shoulder, waiting to see if he needed more help. Or the appearance of help, as Stoick would never ask for assistance.

"How longâ€¦" Stoick breathed slowly. "How long have I been ill?"

"A few days," Hiccup lied. It had been closer to a week, but Stoick wouldn't want to know that. Not yet.

Hiccup stepped back as Stoick swung his legs over the side of his bed, glaring at Hiccup.

"Dadâ€¦ that's not-"

Stoick stood up. And immediately sat down again, breathing harder.

Hiccup glared at his father.

"Stop being ridiculous."

"Are you â€¦ calling... your fatherâ€¦ ridiculous...again?"

"Yes. And my chief, too."

Stoick glared back at Hiccup. "Taking advantage of my slightly weakened state?"

Hiccup snorted at that. Stoick could be moments from Valhalla and Hiccup would still not be able to best him in any combat. But if he was arguing, then Stoick was far from death. Thank the Gods.

"No, Dad. But this winter sickness is worse than most, and so are you. Justâ€¦ please listen to me and lie down."

"Or what?"

"I'll ask Gobber to sing to you."

Stoick's eyes widened, and then narrowed again. Ordinarily, Stoick's glare would give Hiccup five immediate reasons to do whatever it was Stoick wanted - and most of the village had the same reaction. This time, Hiccup crossed his arms over his chest and looked at his father.

"All day. And all night."

"Fine," Stoick grumbled, laying back down and allowing Hiccup to cover him. Toothless left the room. They heard the sound of a well-aimed blast reigniting the firewood, and then Hiccup heard the door close. Had he left it open when he and Toothless had come in? Toothless must have closed it.

Stoick propped himself up on a few pillows and asked Hiccup about the village. Was there enough food? How many were still sick? How many in the great hall? How long had he been sick _really?_ Hiccup did his best to answer his questions accurately, except for that last one. If he told his father how long he'd been asleep, well, Hiccup knew his dad better than most. Stoick would make himself get up and go down to the hall right then.

Shortly afterward, Stoick fell asleep, his breathing slower, deeper and, most importantly, soft.

Hiccup took his things out of his father's room and went upstairs to his own for the first time in a week.

â€¦

Astrid knew Hiccup had gone back to his house. She'd watched him leave the great hall after sitting with Gothi. Figuring he wouldn't be in any great hurry to get there, she waited a bit, gathered some things as she wandered a slow, seemingly random route around the room, and had some food. When more logs were tossed on the main fire, she figured it enough time had passed. Then she slipped out through a side door.

Astrid stood in the square and looked up. The night sky was empty aside from a few million stars and a low, pale white moon. Astrid whistled to Toothless, looking for him.

No answer. He'd gone up to the house with Hiccup. But he would have remembered her request, she thought. He seemed to understand what she'd said, anyway. Who knew with dragons, especially Toothless?

She walked a bit then whistled again. Still no sign of him.

"Toothless?"

Astrid started to walk up the hill toward the chief's house, then cut over to a side path where she was less likely to be seen.

She whistled again. Nothing. Where was he?

"Toothless?"

Then he dropped from a rooftop to land directly behind her, and she jumped back.

"Toothless! Do you enjoy scaring the wits out of me?"

Toothless' low, staccato laugh made her elbow him in the shoulder.

"Of course you do. Can you fly me up?" Toothless pivoted so she could climb aboard his saddle, and she reached down to adjust his tailfin so he could jump high and glide back down safely. When they landed on the roof of Hiccup's home, Astrid jumped down off the saddle as quickly as she could, but when her feet touched the roof tiles, she slipped, her legs flying out from under her. Toothless quickly lifted one foot and stepped on her so she wouldn't move. He lowered his head, and bit down on her braid without his teeth, repositioning his legs so that three were embedded in the ice on the slope of the roof. Then, he reached under her with one leg, released her braid and lifted her close to his body, under his wings and out of sight.

"Thanks, Toothless," she whispered.

He grunted in reply, stretching his head to nudge the wooden flap covering the window of Hiccup's room. She lifted the edge and peeked into the room. He wasn't there. They waited. Dragons, not the most warm-blooded of creatures, weren't a reliable source of heat, though Astrid was grateful to be out of the wind. Still, within a few minutes, she was very cold, and was thinking she might have to abandon her plan.

Where was Hiccup? Did climbing stairs take him all year? Then Astrid realized the flaw in her strategy - Hiccup might be sleeping downstairs near Stoick.

She was about to tell Toothless to take her back down to the village when he nudged her belly with the side of his claw. He heard something. She lifted the wood cover a little higher.

Hiccup's shadow had appeared on the wall, moving slowly up the staircase. When he came into view, Astrid knew she'd been right about what was going on with him. He looked exhausted.

There were dark smudges under his eyes, and he looked depleted, barely able to lift his arms.

He sat down on his bed, rubbing his head and his eyes, and reached down to detach his leg.

23. Chapter 23 - Quiet Conversations

****Quiet Conversations****

Astrid tapped on the window frame to get Hiccup's attention. He stood up quickly.

"Toothless?"

"You're half right," Astrid replied, lifting the flap higher.

"_Astrid?_" Hiccup whispered, a strange look of disbelief and wonder on his face. Astrid wondered for a moment if he'd caught another fever. He didn't usually look at her like that.

"What are you doing?" Hiccup stepped closer to the window, and looked up at them. Astrid was still tight against Toothless' body, but Toothless lowered his head over her shoulder and greeted Hiccup.

"Toothless, how did you get up there? You were just here a minute ago."

"We had plans, Toothless and I," Astrid answered, grinning at Toothless, who nudged her with his nose.

"You two are getting too good at scheming."

"Can I drop in? It's freezing up here."

Hiccup jumped back to grab a chair to stand on, but Astrid was quicker. She pushed the wood up so Toothless could prop it on his head, reached down, grabbed the edge of the window and flipped herself down into the room. She landed, then stepped to the side. Toothless slid down into the room, tapping the wooden flap upward so it didn't close on his tail.

The three of them stood motionless, listening for any sound or movement below them.

"Thanks, Toothless," Astrid said in a quiet almost-whisper. Toothless nodded, always regal, and fired a blast at his bed so he could curl onto it.

Astrid looked around. She's been in Hiccup's room when he was ill, and once before that, but she hadn't spent any significant time there, not since they were kids. When she'd visited Hiccup after the Great Battle, his bed had been by the fire downstairs, and she'd never gone up to his room. When she dropped in before, she was focused on him, and didn't notice what the rest of the room looked like.

Now that she had more than a few minutes to look around, she realized how much had changed. When they were kids and she and the others had run past Hiccup up to his room, the space they found had been mostly empty, with nothing that indicated it was his room. It had looked generic, like anyone could have lived there. Snotlout had pronounced it boring and immediately left. The others had followed, and she'd gone with them.

Now, it was clearly Hiccup's space. His presence, revealed in the pieces of all the things he loved or was curious about, was everywhere. Nothing was hidden. His desk was covered with drawings, pages nailed to the wall and spilling onto the floor. A old shield leaned against one corner, charcoal lines all over it, and an assortment of items Hiccup had collected on his journeys with Toothless filled a small shelf on the wall by his bed. She wandered over to inspect them. Shells, shiny rocks, and pieces of crystal shared the space with a twist of metal and a tattered, burnt scrap of leather.

Toothless' original tail, destroyed in the Great Battle. He'd kept pieces of it.

Astrid looked over her shoulder at Hiccup. He hadn't moved, and was watching her with a tired and confused expression.

"Are you looking for something?"

"No," she replied. "Just exploring."

"I have to sit down," Hiccup said, taking a seat on his bed. "I'm sorry. I'm exhausted."

He looked up at her suddenly. "Are you only ever here when I'm half delirious?"

Astrid shrugged, and turned back to her exploration, but not before she saw Hiccup blanch at what he'd just said out loud. He was so tired, he didn't think before he spoke. Not that he always did, but he had developed some ability to suppress himself before he said something really dumb.

He'd be in perfect shape now for interrogation, Astrid thought. Too bad there wasn't anything in particular she wanted him to tell her.

"Why are you here?" Hiccup spoke in a low voice, just above a whisper. Astrid had wandered over to Toothless' side of the room, but she turned to face Hiccup. He was rubbing the back of his head absently.

"Checking on you," she replied in the same low voice.

"Why?"

She looked at him. "I can leave-"

"No, no. You don't have to go," he said around a yawn. Poor Hiccup. She should let him sleep but she couldn't bring herself to leave yet.

"Wait." He sat up straighter. "How are you going to get back out the window? And back to the village?"

"Toothless. But you can give me a boost up if I need to climb onto the roof."

He looked at her, clearly doubtful of her plan, and she lifted a brow at him. She had thought ahead. Except for the flaw she now saw from his perspective, where she'd thought it was a good idea to come through the roof window.

Into his _room_.

At _night_.

Other than that part, it was a perfectly logical way to arrange a meeting where no one would overhear.

Overhear. _Uh, oh,_ she thought.

"Is your dad asleep?"

"I think so, yeah."

"Can I sit down?"

Hiccup waved an arm and gestured around the room, and she moved some papers to the side and hopped onto the surface of his desk. Much like Stormfly, she liked to perch on things, especially if it meant she could jump down and run if need be.

"Did he wake up?"

"Yeah, about an hour ago. His breathing is better. I think it is, anyway. I can't hear it from up here."

Astrid reached into her satchel. "I brought more of the cold remedy ingredients if you need them - the stuff that's harder to take without people noticing."

Hiccup stood and came over to her. "How did you get all this?"

"I have my ways," she said, with a sneaky grin. Hiccup waited for her to elaborate, and when she didn't, he took the wormroot and the packets of powder and put them on his bedside table.

"So, talk." Astrid swung her legs back and forth, looking down at the desk to see what drawings she was sitting on. What had he been working on lately?

"Sorry?"

"Talk."

"About what?"

"Hiccup."

"What?"

"I know you."

"Okay?" Hiccup sat down on his bed again. More like collapsed onto it.

"How are you?" Astrid leaned forward toward him a bit.

"Fine?"

Astrid sighed. "Hiccup. Come on. You've been stuck up here for days with Toothless and your father. You must be itching to talk to someone."

"When am I ever itching to talk?"

Astrid folded her arms over her chest.

"Ok. You're right. You're right. I have been talking to myself a lot. And my dad, but he's sleeping."

Astrid laughed. "That must have been fun."

"Sort of. I can say a lot of things knowing he can't answer and probably doesn't hear me."

Astrid waited, expecting him to say more, but Hiccup didn't elaborate. She could see now how dark the shadows were under his eyes, and he barely had the energy to smile, let alone look up from the floor.

"What were you about to do when I got here?"

"Take off my leg and go to bed."

And that was her cue. Time to go. She jumped off the table and headed for the window. "Ok, see you tomorrow!"

"No, wait," Hiccup said, standing up. He tried to stand up quickly but barely managed it. "I - I haven't don't..."

He sat back down. Hiccup, it seemed, had run out. He was out of energy, and out of words. She needed to leave him alone so he could sleep.

24. Chapter 24 - Telling the Truth

****Telling the Truth****

Instead of leaving, Astrid sat down on the bed next to him, leaning back against the post at the foot of his bed and folding one leg under her.

She also tried not assemble any thought that contained both the words "Hiccup" and "bed," because there would be no way to hide her reaction. Of course, he was so sleepy she could probably see herself on fire and he'd barely notice.

Hiccup turned and leaned against the headboard, mimicking her

posture. He tipped his head back against the post behind him, looking up at the window. It was mostly closed but not entirely, so a sliver of the night sky was still visible around the perimeter. Astrid could see a few stars from where she sat.

"I am not good at this," Hiccup said.

"At what, talking to girls in your room at night?"

His head jerked up and he looked at her in horror. She laughed. "I'm kidding, Hiccup."

"I don't have girls in my room. Day or night. Or ever."

"You do now."

His face flushed so quickly, she had to bite her lip to keep from laughing again. Hiccup was often easy to fluster, but it was really tempting to tease him now when he was so tired he had no mental defenses left.

"Trying not to think about that," Hiccup muttered. Astrid felt her own face begin to burn, and pushed her bangs out of her eyes to cover her face for a moment.

"So go on. What aren't you good at?"

"Taking care of people."

Astrid scoffed at that.

"No, really. I'm not."

"Hiccup. That is untrue. You take care of the dragons, of us, of the village. You took care of Mornen and Gothi today. I saw you."

He blew out a breath, puffing up his cheeks and closing his eyes. "Yeah, I'll probably get in trouble for that when my dad wakes up and hears about it."

"No. I don't think you will," Astrid replied. "Why would you think you're not good at taking care of people?"

"Because I don't know what to do." Hiccup's eyes were still closed, and he was so relaxed, Astrid wondered if he'd drop off to sleep sitting there. How was she going to push him onto his bed if he did?

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't know what to do. I sit there, waiting for him to wake up, scared when he doesn't, hating the way his breathing sounds, and scared that it'll stop."

Astrid thought Hiccup was among the bravest people she knew, in part because he was never afraid to admit he was scared. She heard him say once, maybe to Fishlegs, that having courage wasn't the same as having no fear. Astrid thought that courage also meant being able to admit you felt fear in the first place.

"You said he coughed earlier."

"Yeah. He did. Sat up, growled at me, tried to get out of bed."

"How'd that work out?"

"Not well for him. Good for me. I can't carry him so if he'd left his room and fallen down, he'd still be there now."

"How'd you get him back in bed?"

Hiccup laughed, a short, quiet sound, and his mouth curved into a dim smile, his eyes still closed.

"I threatened to have Gobber sing to him."

Astrid covered her mouth to muffle her laughter. "I wonder if that would work to threaten Snotlout?"

"Probably not. He'd just sing along," Hiccup replied, covering a yawn. She shifted to stand, but he opened his eyes and reached toward her with his other hand, palm up. "No. Don't go yet. I'mâ€¦ I needed this. To talk. You were right. Thank you."

Still the bravest person she knew. She sat back against the post of his bed.

"If he's awake sometimes, and coughing, and trying to get out of bed, those are all good signs, Hiccup. Sounds like he's getting better."

"Yeah. I think so. I hope so, anyway."

"So then what's the matter?"

"I'mâ€¦ I'm exhausted, Astrid. Not from lack of sleep, though that's part of it. I'mâ€¦ Iâ€¦." He stopped and looked down at his hands.

"You're tired of being in charge?"

"Yeah. And I wasn't even in charge of anything, except hiding how sick my dad is. Was. Whatever. I wasn't doing anything except sitting here and going to the great hall for a few minutes, and I can barely stand up straight. How am I going toâ€¦." He trailed off, shoulders slumping even more than they had been.

"How are you going to be chieftain?" Astrid finished his sentence for him.

"Yeah," he said. "I can't do it."

"I don't think that's true, Hiccup." He shook his head, and she sat up and shifted closer to him on the bed, lowering her head until he had no choice but to look at her.

"I don't think you're tired because you can't manage being chief. You're tired because you haven't had a lot of sleep, you're not thinking straight, and you're lying to everyone and you hate it."

He frowned at her. She put her hand on his knee and leaned a bit closer so he couldn't look away.

"You, Hiccup, are a pretty terrible liar, at least to anyone who knows you well," Astrid continued. He never could lie to her. She could always tell, and he knew it.

"And part of why you're not good at it is that you hate doing it. You aren't very good at being deliberately deceitful, and when you have to, your discomfort shows."

"Great. So everyone knows that my dad is really sick? They'll be up here tomorrow, then."

"No, Hiccup," Astrid said, exasperated. "No one knows. You hid everything and you did it brilliantly. Even though you didn't like lying, you did it. Everyone is calm. No one's worried."

Hiccup shrugged. Astrid recognized the gesture, and knew that it meant that he wasn't willing to take more credit for himself than he thought he deserved. And he thought he deserved very little.

"I imagine you had as much to do with that, probably more than I did."

"No," she said, tapping him on the knee with her fist.

"Hey, no hitting. I'm too tired to hit you back."

"You never hit me back."

"True."

"You may not like lying to everyone or pretending, but you did great this week. You're a lot better at it than you think, Hiccup. No one has any idea, except me and Gobber, I think."

"Yeah, Gobber was up here a few times."

"See? If the only people who have showed up are me and Gobber, you're fine."

Hiccup nodded, looking down. Astrid poked him on the outside of his thigh so he'd look up at her again. If she could see his eyes, she knew he was listening to her. "Don't look down. I know where you're ticklish."

"Don't," he said, drawing back from her. "That would wake my dad for sure."

She smiled at him, and his face lightened. He grinned back at her.

"You're doing fine. Better than fine. Being tired is normal. And being chief, it wouldn't be like this all the time. This is a lot to lift on your own."

"Yeah, you're not kidding about that. My dad_ is_ a lot to lift," he replied. Astrid laughed, trying to remain quiet but not doing so

well. Toothless growled at her.

"Sorry. We'll go in a minute, Toothless," she said, looking over her shoulder at him. When she turned back to Hiccup, he looked...content. More relaxed, less exhausted and unhappy.

"You should go to sleep. I bet your dad gets up tomorrow and you'll have to try to keep him in the house."

"Oh, Gods," Hiccup groaned, but he was still smiling. He reached over and picked up his pillow, the one she had made. He looked down at it, then up at her, his face serious, almost intense.

"Thank you."

She wasn't sure what he was thanking her for, but it didn't really matter.

"You're welcome." She stood up, and Toothless stretched and followed her to the window.

"Toothless, I don't think I should be on your back. The moon is higher and someone would see me. Well, they'd see my hair. You go first," she said, gesturing toward the window. Toothless gave a tiny blast to push the wooden flap up, jumped through through the window, then turned and stuck his head back inside.

Astrid turned to Hiccup, who had moved to stand behind her. She put her hands on his shoulders, and his back stiffened slightly. She saw him glance at her lips briefly before he returned his gaze to her eyes, his own lips pressed together. She smiled at him.

"Give me a boost up?"

He cupped his hands, and she stepped into them, then reached up for Toothless and grabbed part of his harness and the edge of the window. Toothless reached down, bit her hood and lifted her out of the window.

He lowered her to the roof, and she braced her feet against Toothless' claws, which were embedded again through the ice and into the roof tiles below it. But before she reached up to grab his harness and pull herself closer to his belly, she tapped Toothless' leg.

"Hold on one minute," Astrid said. Toothless huffed at her. "Just one minute, I promise."

She then turned over and slid forward so she could lean downward, back into Hiccup's room. Toothless dropped his claws around her ankle and pressed down so she wouldn't fall back in.

Hiccup hadn't moved, and looked confused as she leaned toward him.

"Did you forget something?"

"Yeah," she said, with a wide grin.

She reached for Hiccup's vest, grabbed it and brought him closer to

her. Then she leaned in and kissed his cheek.

"Goodnight, Hiccup. Peaceful dreams."

...

Hiccup was frozen in place when Astrid disappeared out the window. The flap shut behind her, and he heard Toothless take off and glide down toward the village.

When Toothless returned and slid through the window again, this time without Astrid, Hiccup was still standing in the same spot.

"That shouldn't be a problem," he said.

25. Chapter 25 - The Firebreather

The Firebreather

The next morning, Stoick was well enough that he went down to the great hall to deal with some of the village business that had likely piled up. Hiccup didn't think he needed to try to stop his father, and wasn't sure he'd be able to anyway, so he headed to the forge.

"Ah, nice to see you back from your wee vacation," Gobber greeted him while pounding a piece of softened steel into a vicious curve.

"If that's vacation, I don't need another one. Ever," Hiccup said, tying on an apron and grabbing a pair of gloves. "What's on for today?"

"Oh, the usual. Sharpening and fixing and lighting things on fire, plus saddles. Oh - and I have something for you."

"For me?" Hiccup followed Gobber into the storage room, where Gobber squeezed himself between two cabinets, pushed some barrels aside, and nudged a pile of spears, causing half of them to tip over like tall pines in the forest.

"I'll wait out here," Hiccup said, backing away.

"Just be a minute," Gobber said, the upper half of his body behind a cabinet. "Had to hide this one. Not good if anyone found it."

"Uh, oh," Hiccup said.

"Aye," Gobber replied. He backed out of the storage room, carrying what looked like a catapult, except that it was small, and mounted on the old stock of a crossbow.

"What is that?" Hiccup tried not to stand in the line of fire, but he wanted to get closer to figure out what Gobber had built.

"It's a Firebreather."

"A what?"

"I got to thinking, you know, all that time alone in the forge this

past week, all this work, lots of time by myselfâ€|."

Hiccup folded his arms and leaned back against a table, saying nothing.

"Anyway, I got to thinking, dragons, they breathe fire."

"Yes. Yes, they do." Hiccup had a feeling that he wouldn't like where this conversation was going.

"What if we vikings could breathe fire, too?"

"If we could... what?"

"If vikings and dragons both could breathe fire in battle. Now that would be quite useful, wouldn't it? Dragons have a shot limit, after all."

"How do you propose we begin breathing fire?"

"Not with our mouths, laddie. I tried that. Didn't work."

Hiccup decided he didn't want to know and was better off not asking.

"But, think of it this way: if we've got hot metal, and we hit it with a hammer, or we're sharpening a blade, what do we get?"

"Sparks, usually."

"Exactly. So what if we set up a wee ball of something that's already on fire -"

"Already on fire?" Hiccup said.

"Aye. Keep up. You load the wee ball here, and pull back like a crossbow," Gobber continued, arming the weapon as he demonstrated. "When you light it and fire it, this hammer follows the flight path, and should strike the ball from behind. That'll cause it to go faster, and cause a trail of sparks AND fire at the same time. As it's flying toward your enemy. Almost like breathing."

Hiccup did not know what to say, but he did think quickly about whether any of Gobber's clothing was fire proof, because he knew what was coming next.

"Come on, let's test it out."

"Ok, um, Gobber, this is a great idea, but - before we test it with dragons in flight, we should probably test it on the ground."

"Already did. Want to see?" Gobber balanced the Firebreather on his shoulder and headed for the yard. "Follow me."

Hiccup went out a different door.

"All right, Hiccup." Gobber walked around the forge, and looked to his right. "Hiccup? Where'd you go?"

"Here. Other side of you."

"How'd you get over there? Never mind. Now, you see where I tested it?"

The entire back wall of the forge was covered in deep black scorch marks, like dragon fire, only much smaller.

"That's a lot of firepower you have there."

"Aye. This is a great invention, I'm telling you. Will change everything."

Hiccup didn't know what to say.

"Ok, then. Here you go." Gobber tossed the crossbow at Hiccup, who caught it while jumping back from it at the same time.

"What would you like me to do with this?"

"Go north, where it's darker, and find a place to test it out. Melt a few icebergs with it and see if we need to add more fire."

"Uh, ok. I think I could -"

"No, no, go tomorrow. That way, when we start preparing for the next battle practice, we'll have had time to make more!"

"Ok," Hiccup said. He looked down at the device in his hands, and could see how it might be improved, though he wasn't sure that the vikings needed handheld weapons designed to increase the speed of things that were on fire. They had plenty of flammable weapons. And he wouldn't want the twins having a weapon like this one.

"Take some of the others with you. Give you targets to practice on," Gobber was saying as he went back inside the forge. Hiccup followed, and tucked the Firebreather in his back room, behind his desk.

"I'll tell them, sure."

The rest of the day was busy, and there were more than the normal number of visitors in the forge. Somehow, a few people had gotten the idea that Stoick had been at home this past week caring for Hiccup. They hadn't seen him or Stoick and had drawn their own conclusions. So they came to ask how he was, and stayed to talk with Gobber, who never lacked for things to say.

Hiccup couldn't reveal that it was the other way around. After awhile, the misunderstanding of a few, which was sure to spread, became a weighty feeling, pressing on him. By the end of the day, the forge felt smaller, and he did want to fly off and not be bothered for awhile, with or without firebreathing weaponry.

"Don't forget the Firebreather," Gobber said as they left.

"Oh, no, won't forget that," Hiccup mumbled, going back to retrieve it.

Gobber watched him from the doorway with a smile. Then, in a loud,

jovial voice that carried probably all the way to the water, he said, "Now get yourself back to bed, young man. You're up much too soon, sick as you were."

"Thanks, Gobber."

Gobber lifted his hand, and Hiccup anticipated a push on the shoulder. But instead, Gobber put his hand on Hiccup's head and gently smoothed his hair. Hiccup froze.

"Good lad," he said in a voice that barely reached between them. "Off with you."

Hiccup stood in the doorway, watching Gobber make his way down to his home.

...

When he started the long path toward his house, Hiccup's mind was already filling with ideas and alterations he might make to the Firebreather to create a slightly safer and much more useful weapon. He turned the device over in his hands - after disarming the bow string - and looked at how Gobber had constructed it.

He was so focused, he didn't hear Astrid until she was beside him.

"Hiccup!" He jumped and nearly fell off the path. Where had she come from?

"I've been calling your name - are you ok?"

"Oh, sorry, I didn't hear you," he said.

"Yeah, I noticed," Astrid said. "What is that?"

"A Firebreather. Gobber made it. It's supposed to shoot lit balls of fire and somehow make sparks as it fires. I haven't tested it yet."

"Huh," Astrid said, stepping forward for a closer look.

"He tested it on the back wall of the forge, and now he wants me to go north and test it in the darkness with Toothless."

"How do you think Toothless will react to you firing a flaming cross bow over his head?"

"I'm guessing not well. Probably why Gobber told me to take people with me."

"I'll go," Astrid said quickly. "I mean, someone has to pull you out of the water when Toothless tosses you."

"Yeah, thanks. Can you tell the others?"

"You want the twins to test a weapon called a Firebreather?"

Hiccup scratched his cheek and thought a moment. "No, no. Probably not. Fishlegs will want to come, though. And Snotlout."

"When are you going?"

"Tomorrow evening. It'll be darker the further north we fly. We can camp out and return in the morning, if we have to," Hiccup said, looking closer at the firing mechanism of the crossbow. He didn't see Astrid look up at him, then away.

"I'll spread the word," Astrid said, turning toward the village. "How many of those do you have?"

"Just the one - I hope. I think it's a good idea, but I'm not sure this is the best way to go about it."

"You'll figure it out," Astrid replied. She started walking down the hill. "See you tomorrow."

26. Chapter 26 - By the Fire

****By the Fire****

Hiccup didn't feel much like talking to anyone, despite having been alone for the week. He'd had enough people come by the forge that he needed silence.

When he got to his house, though, Stoick was already sitting by the fire, eating and watching the flames. Hiccup fixed himself some food and took a seat across from him. He hadn't taken two bites before Stoick spoke.

"You lied to me, Hiccup."

Did his father always have to have these intense conversations by a fire? Lit flames, red beard - Stoick looked plenty scary when he was angry. He didn't need the special effects.

"About what?"

"How long I was ill."

Oh, yes. That.

"Yeah...yeah, I did."

"Why?"

"Because if I told you you'd been asleep for nearly a week, you'd have pushed yourself out of bed and made yourself even sicker."

Stoick nodded slowly, but Hiccup could see he was still angry about it.

"Who knew?"

"Knew what, that you were sick?"

"Aye."

"Uh, me, and Gobber, andâ€¦ umâ€¦."

"Astrid?"

Hiccup sat up straighter, telling himself he'd done anything wrong.

"Yes."

"That's all?"

"Yes."

Stoick sighed and leaned forward, placing his plate on the table next to him, and propping his elbows on his knees. He rubbed his hands together slowly, which immediately told Hiccup that it was time for a lecture.

"Hiccup, part of being the chief is keeping secrets."

"Dad - "

"No, son, let me finish. I know you think being chief is about speeches and leadership and all that - and it is. But it's also about not telling people the things they don't need to know."

Stoick lowered his voice.

"You did the right thing."

Hiccup stared at him. "That is not what I expected you to say."

"Gobber told me you kept showing yourself in the great hall, pretending that all was well - or better than it was. You did the right thing."

"Well, if everyone had known how sick you were, or known how scared...scary it was, I would have hadâ€¦" He faltered, trying to explain a certainty that he didn't fully understand. "Everyone, they all would haveâ€¦"

"Yes. They would have. Most, if not all. Panicked, gotten over-involved, invaded the house, planned for multiple outcomes, and everything else. That's why it's the job of a chief to talk, but also to keep secrets. To protect everyone."

"Even from themselves?"

Stoick laughed, a short bark of sound. "Especially then."

Then he sobered, looking at Hiccup, his eyes bright over his beard, the fire throwing intermittent light over them both.

"The people are Berk are good people. You know that. But as chief - don't look down. Look at me."

Hiccup held his gaze, gripping the underside of his plate with his fingers. Stoick drew a slow breath.

"As chief, it's crucial to keep many things to yourself. You have to."

Stoick picked up a short spear and jabbed at some of the logs before he continued.

"That's why you should always, always have a person who can keep those secrets with you. For me, it was your mother. Then, after _"

Hiccup suddenly understood. "Gobber."

"Aye. He's not a shrewd thinker, but he can carry more than his weight in responsibilities. And in secrets. He listens, he argues with me, and he keeps those conversations to himself. Which is why he was here, and down in the hall, helping you by telling everyone we were fine up here."

"Is that whyâ€¦|."

"Why what?"

"Why I was his apprentice? I mean, I was not the most likely viking to go work in a forge."

"Aye, that's true. And that's part of the reason, though there were others. Gobber carries some of the weight with me. Not _for_ me, you understand. He carries it _with_ me."

Hiccup nodded, gazing into the fire.

"So. Astrid."

Hiccup looked up, alarmed at the soft tone of his father's voice.

"I wasn't asleep. Last night."

"Oh, Gods."

Stoick laughed, a low rumble that made Toothless lift his head, then resettle on his smoldering bed.

"You tell her things. The things you think about, things you don't tell anyone."

Hiccup's mind was racing in circles, listing all the things he'd told Astrid about the night before.

How much did his dad hear?

He couldn't remember every last thing they'd talked about, but he might as well own up to it.

"Yes." Hiccup took a breath and tried to explain. "Sheâ€¦| I know her. She listens. She doesn't always agree with me, and she argues with me all the time, but she would never tell anyone else. She helped me. Us. This week. She and Gobber both, in the great hall."

Stoick nodded.

"You trust her."

What he felt about Astrid, what he thought about Astrid, wasn't so easily summed up in one word, but that was certainly part of it. He met his father's gaze without hesitation.

"Yes."

"She's a good choice."

Hiccup was surprised.

"Don't look shocked. You know this. She's strong, and fearless, and wise. She is the best choice to carry it with you."

Hiccup nodded.

"Thanks, Dad."

The fire crackled. Stoick pushed at some of the logs with a metal rod, and Hiccup watched the flames devour the wood while he ate. The silence between them wasn't an obstacle like it usually was. Then his father spoke.

"You know your responsibilities."

Hiccup frowned at Stoick, unsure what he meant.

"With Astrid."

Still not sure.

"Don't get caught. In your room. Together."

Oh.

"I don't...plan anything. She just...she's just _there_."

"Hmmm," Stoick said. Was that a smirk on his face? "I don't want an angry visit from her family, though."

"Me, neither," Hiccup said quickly. If they were caught, the consequences would be a mess. A mess he'd like to avoid entirely, even if the end result would be...not a mess at all.

Hiccup changed the subject.

"How was everything at the great hall?"

Stoick shifted back a fraction. Hiccup didn't usually ask about village business outright. He knew plenty of it from attending council meetings, but he'd never asked his father about it before.

"Most are getting better," Stoick replied, shifting his jaw in a way that made it seem that for a moment, he'd forgotten how to talk.

"I suppose it's not an entirely bad thing that I was ill along with so many others," Stoick continued. "Things are about the same. Somewhat."

Hiccup nodded and continued eating.

As he and Stoick discussed the village, the flames grew and fell to embers, and the room stayed warm.

27. Chapter 27 - Cold Awareness

****Cold Awareness****

Hiccup and Toothless were already in the air when Astrid and Stormfly arrived at the academy.

"I'm heading towards Svenson's Island. I'll meet you there," Hiccup called down to her. Astrid waved, and Hiccup and Toothless shot through the air, heading north where the sky was dark blue and the first stars were appearing.

Svenson's Island, one of a small group of islands below the northern stars, was a landmark for all the dragon riders, especially those like Hiccup who mapped and explored. Turning west from Svenson meant heading toward Nadder Island, and going east for an hour or so would bring them to Heiven's Falls, a huge mountainous island with a waterfall that iced over in the winter and made for excellent dragon sliding races. But Hiccup and Toothless flew fast in a straight line north from Berk, the heavy feeling of worry and responsibility falling away from Hiccup's mind as they raced over the waves, spinning and gliding through the cold air, and diving over icebergs and rough water. Svenson's would be their first stop, and Hiccup wanted to have a bit more time to himself - just him and Toothless - before the rest of the group caught up to them to begin Firebreather practice.

Toothless was already faster than most dragons, so they probably had a good amount of time before the others showed on the horizon. Plus, they were flying at top speed, even for a Night Fury. The wind froze the tips of Hiccup's hair beneath his helmet, and his hands inside his gloves were aching, but he didn't tell Toothless to slow down. When the craggy top of Svenson came into view, he and Toothless banked sharply to the left, and flew around the island before choosing a spot to land. Parts of the island were covered with ice, which was normal for the time of year, but some of the cliffs provided shelter beneath sharp overhangs that looked like giant dragon teeth. Spotting a good option for them to rest, Hiccup pointed out a spot to Toothless, who dove down toward the ground.

"Think they'll notice us here, Toothless?" Toothless shook himself, knocking a few pieces of ice from his back and sides.

"You're right. We do need a fire. Be right back." Hiccup wandered the cliff edge which wrapped around the mountain and gathered some pieces of dry, twisted wood that had fallen from the trees above them. He added kindling from the small supply he'd tucked in as saddlebag, and piled them into a small pyramid, then stepped back. Toothless fired, then curled himself next to the blaze he'd helped create.

"You know, bud, that's one of the best parts of being friends with a dragon. Instant fire." Toothless murmured, then used his tail to shove Hiccup closer to the flames. "Ok, ok. I'm coming, Mr."

Bossy."

Hiccup removed his helmet, shook the ice from his hair, and sat down next to Toothless. He leaned back against Toothless' belly and reaching into the bag above his head to grab his notebook and charcoal. "How long do you think they'll be, huh? Think I'll need more wood before they arrive?"

Toothless grunted. He didn't seem to care much so long as he could be warm for as long as they waited.

The crackling of the dry wood and the occasional hiss of melting ice were the only sounds, aside from Toothless' murmuring noises of contentment and the scratch of Hiccup's charcoal in his notebook. He was trying to improve his ability to draw people, now that he'd figured out the best way to capture the shape and movement of dragons. People were harder. Dragons had a stillness to them that made them easier to sketch. With people, Hiccup struggled, disappointed with his efforts, thinking that he'd get the slope of someone's shoulder, or the curve of their arm just right, but their faces would always look strange, like he'd caught them between expressions, or about to sneeze.

Lately, he'd been trying to sketch Gobber. He'd tried to sketch Astrid, but that had been a disaster, the results so embarrassing he'd ripped the pages out of his notebook and burned them, lest anyone, including himself, see them. He hadn't been able to sketch his father easily - he always came out looking angry, about to rampage off the paper, and though Stoick was angry a good bit, that wasn't the appearance Hiccup had been trying for. With Gobber, Hiccup knew enough of his mannerisms and movements, but wasn't so intimidated by him that he couldn't pin him down with charcoal. He'd started with sketching Gobber's arm attachments, then his legs, then his back. He'd tried to draw him in profile, bent over the fire and gesturing with his hammer, but it looked to Hiccup like Gobber was about to dive into the fire pit, so he'd started over.

People were difficultâ€¦in lots of different ways, Hiccup thought to himself as he turned a page. He noticed the light was growing dimmer, and was about to stand up when Toothless nudged him.

"More wood, I know. I'm going, I'm going. " He picked up a few more pieces and added them to the flames, then sat back down against Toothless, who had brought one wing up a bit to catch some of the heat and direct it down onto both of them.

"Thanks, bud," Hiccup said. Toothless opened his eyes, then his ears and head lifted, alert, listening.

"What is it?" Toothless looked around at the dark sky above them, sniffing, but he didn't seem concerned or nervous. "They're here, huh? Well, quiet time is over, then."

Hiccup stood and tucked his notebook back into his saddlebag, waiting for the sound of wings and claws on rock to announce their arrival.

But what he saw was Stormfly and Astrid. They swooped down, landing behind Toothless, who stood to greet them with a happy sound. Hiccup waved at them, then looked back at the sky.

"Where are the others?"

"They're not coming," Astrid said, jumping down off Stormfly to greet Toothless. She moved closer to the fire quickly, and held out her hands. "Thank the gods you built a fire. It's cold up there. And the higher we go, the happier Stormfly is, right, girl?"

Stormfly crowed and shook herself, then sat alongside the fire next to Toothless. Hiccup was still looking at the sky, waiting, but turned around when he finally understood Astrid's words.

"Not coming?"

"Nope." Astrid sat down next to the dragons, scooting as close to the fire as she could without becoming part of it herself.

"Where are they?"

"They're camping out. Tuffnut dared Ruff to sleep in the haunted caves, and Snotlout and Fishlegs went with them."

"Did youâ€¦ tell them about this trip?"

"Nope. I was about to this afternoon when they ran past me, egging Ruffnut on and heading for the forest with their gear." She glanced up at Hiccup, who hadn't moved. "They already had plans, no big deal."

It was a very big deal, Hiccup thought. Ordinarily, even yesterday, this wouldn't have been a problem. Being with Astrid might have made him a little nervous, but he didn't think much of it. She always made him a little nervous.

But now, he felt a cold dread building in his chest, at war with the happiness he always felt when he saw her. His father had just warned him. Hiccup could still hear his voice. And so thisâ€¦with Astrid and him and the others in the caves and not hereâ€¦.

This was not good.

28. Chapter 28 - Disarmed and Angry

****Disarmed and Angry****

"Oh, Gods."

Astrid looked up at Hiccup. His eyes were wide, his cheeks flushed like he'd been too close to the fire. "Are you ok?"

"Yeah. No."

"Which is it?"

"Both. Mostly no. This isn't good." He muttered to himself, turning away and looking out into the darkness behind them.

"What are you talking about? Is something wrong with Toothless?"

"I am so dead."

"What?"

Hiccup spun to face her. "I'm dead."

"No, you're not."

"I will be."

Astrid watched as he crossed over to Toothless and started checking his saddle and tail fin. "What are you doing?"

"We have to go."

"What?" Astrid stood up, but didn't want to leave the fire. "We just got here."

"Yeah, we have to go. I have to go."

"Hiccup, what is wrong with you?"

"I can't stay here. We have to go."

Astrid rolled her eyes and came over to Hiccup, irritated with him for making her step away from the warmth. "What is going on?"

"I told you. We have to go - well, I have to go."

"Hiccup, stop. What's going on?" Astrid was starting to get annoyed by Hiccup's reaction. Why was he acting like he had to get away from her immediately?

Then he started pacing. Astrid threw up her hands and went back to the fire. "Talk to me when you're ready to make sense. I'm going to get warm."

Hiccup stared at her, confusion on his face. He wasn't the only one. Astrid sat back down next to Stormfly and waited for him to say something.

"I have no idea what's going on," Hiccup said.

"Me either. Would you sit down?"

He came closer to the fire but he didn't sit. Astrid didn't mind looking up at him usually but at that moment, she was tempted to kick him.

"Hiccup. Relax."

"Easy for you to say," he grumbled. Astrid glared at him.

He leaned against Toothless, still standing, putting his hands in his hair the way he did when he was really unsure of what to do.

"Hiccup, will you please sit down and explain what your problem is?"

"Iâ€¦ I can't."

Astrid looked at him. "Hiccup. Did you hit your head? What is _with_ you?"

He threw his hands in the air in exasperation and said, "I just told you. I don't know what is going on but... this is not good."

Astrid waited. It was either that or hit him with her axe until he explained himself in language she and other normal humans could understand.

Hiccup dropped his arms by his side, defeated. "I don't know what we are. I don'tâ€¦ I don't have any expectations of you, so you always surprise me."

"That's not a problem," Astrid replied.

"What, that I have no expectations?"

"No, that I surprise you."

"You do. All the time. Especially now. Only this is really not good."

"Hiccup, you are back to making no sense." She turned away and reached into her saddlebag, pulling out a blanket and some food for them.

"Wait, don't. Don't unpack. We aren't staying the night."

Astrid turned. "Why not?"

He stopped pacing abruptly and turned to face her. "'Why not?'" Are - have you gone mad?"

"Not that I know of."

"Astrid, be serious."

She looked at him, a little hurt, and shook her head.

"I can't be here alone with you. Not... If someone found out, you'd-I'd... This is a bad idea."

Is that what he was worried about? For Thor's sake. "Hiccup, stop worrying."

"You're not listening to me," he replied.

"I _am_ listening to you. You're making no sense."

Hiccup looked at her, clearly agitated, and very unsure of himself.

"We have to go," he said again.

"Not leaving," Astrid replied, closing up her bag and pulling her axe off the saddle. She placed it beside her, within arms reach.

"Why do you need your axe?"

"I sleep with it under my pillow. Why?"

Hiccup's eyes widened, and he turned his face away from her. It looked almost like he'd mouthed the word 'sleep.' Then he looked at her again, eyebrows down, determination evident.

"Ok, no, we really have to go now."

"Still not leaving," she replied, leaning back on Stormfly and smirking at him, letting her eyes close. "I just got here, it's freezing cold, and I didn't fly all the way up here to turn around and fly back. Whatever is bothering you, work it out, because I'm not leaving."

"Look, Astrid, I don't want to do thisâ€¦"

Astrid opened her eyes immediately at the tone of his voice, one she'd never heard him use, and found him standing closer to her, glaring. He looked deadly serious. And more angry than she'd ever seen him.

"But I outrank you. You have to do what I say, and we're going back."

He did not just go there. Astrid shot to her feet. "Outrank me? Are you serious?"

"You know it's true."

"Hiccup, you are so going down. You might outrank me, but I can easily kick your butt."

"You are welcome to try." And then he stepped back, ready.

Waiting for her to attack.

He had lost his mind.

Astrid knew she had a temper, and she knew she was losing her grip on it.

But he'd just poked at it. At her.

She grabbed her axe.

Toothless and Stormfly backed away, moving to the other side of the fire as Astrid stalked Hiccup, axe by her side. She heard Toothless growl quietly at Stormfly, who shook her quills.

"No weapons. I'm unarmed. For the moment," Hiccup said, watching her closely.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"No weapons? Means put your axe down."

"No, that you're unarmed 'for the moment.'"

"There'sâ€¦ no other way to say that," Hiccup said, shaking his head and looking slightly baffled.

"Hiccup, this is not funny."

"I don't think it is."

Astrid dropped her axe but kept walking forward as Hiccup moved to stand in the shallow cave behind them. He looked her dead in the eye the entire time, unflinching, and very angry. He hadn't looked at her like that sinceâ€¦since he stood between her and Toothless.

When he looked like that, Astrid knew he was unmovable.

Her anger flared. Didn't matter. She was going to move him right off the edge of the cliff. Howâ€¦how _dare_ he try to tell her what to do by ordering her, by pulling rank. The more she thought about it, the more angry she became, until her focus narrowed onto Hiccup. She saw his face, his jaw set, and then his eyes, glaring at her. Then she saw his eyebrow twitch, daring her.

So she swung.

29. Chapter 29 - Defensive Attacks

****Defensive Attacks****

Hiccup blocked Astrid's punch and pushed her past him. He'd been practicing defensive maneuvers, and she wondered for a fraction of a second with whom. Then she refocused. She pivoted and swung again, aiming for his ribs. He deflected that, and grabbed her arm, using her momentum to spin her around so she was in front of him, pinned under his arms.

"Do you yield?" His voice was low, his mouth next to her ear, and the warmth of his breath on her neck caused a war within her. Feeling any part of Hiccup against her gave her shivers, but now, those shivers acted like a dry wind on the embers of her temper, and they caught fire. He was _not_ going to beat her.

"Never," she replied through her teeth, hooking her foot around his metal leg and trying to knock it out from under him. Dirty move, but she was well and truly furious now, and she was going to take him _down. _

But when she pulled against his leg, he didn't fall. He shifted with her, using his weight to throw her off balance. Pivoting on his right leg, he spun away from her, pushing hard enough that she nearly fell.

Recovering her equilibrium, Astrid landed in a crouch, and prepared to launch herself at him.

He didn't echo her posture. He wasn't going to attack. But she was going to, and he was going to defend himself. She could use that against him, she thought, narrowing her eyes at his stance and trying to calculate his weaknesses.

She ran at him, feinted down to her left, but he knew what she was

doing. Or he thought he did, because he ducked low to block her, and she reversed, flipped over him, and kicked him as she landed.

"Ow!"

"That's for asking if I yield."

"I will never ask again," Hiccup said, watching her as she circled him.

"I grew up fighting you. There's no reason I can't keep going."

"Maybe we couldâ€¦ not fight?"

"Not an option. I'm so angry at you right now I couldâ€¦." She growled at him. "_Outrank me._ What is wrong with you? Why would you _do_ that?!"

"I'm sorry -"

"Too late," Astrid said, glaring and watching his movements. He was up to something. Was he going to move forward? She rolled and swept her leg, trying to knock his feet out from under him.

He jumped, barely avoiding her. "Wait a minute. Will you _stop_?"

"No, Hiccup. I won't. I cannot believe you'd say that to me. WHY would you say that? Why would you try to leave the minute I arrive? What is your _problem_?" She'd stood up, rigid with fury, and her voice increased with rage until she was screaming at him. Her voice echoed off the cliffs, and when it returned to her, beneath the anger, she heard her own hurt.

Hiccup must have, too, because he stepped closer to her, within range of her fists, and she clenched her fingers against her palms. She would _not_ cry.

"I'm trying to do the right thing, trying to protect you-"

"From what?" She yelled, her temper a livid white hot fury inside her.

"Me!" He roared, louder than her.

She stepped back, disarmed for a moment. "You?"

"Yes. No." He thrust his hands into his hair and moved towards the fire, the light throwing his shadow over her. "From what people would say if they found out we wereâ€¦ that you were here with me. Alone."

Astrid swallowed and tried to bring her anger under control. It was not easy. She gripped the wall behind her with her fingers until the sharp edges tried to pierce her fingertips. "I do not care what people say, Hiccup," she replied, glaring at him.

"Most of the time I don't either. About me, anyway. I'm used to it."

But not if it's about you."

"And I can take care of my own honor," she said in a low voice. "That is not your job."

"I know you can," he said softly. "But I couldn't bear it if.. if you-" He spun around, turning his back to her, moving toward the edge of the rock they stood on.

That was not wise of him. She could tackle him. Take him down easily.

She'd done it before.

Countless times.

It would take a moment, the space between one breath and the next. She could hurt him.

But she didn't move. The way Hiccup stood, shaking his head, starting and stopping as he tried to explain— Astrid stood up from the wall and listened.

"Astrid, I don't know what's going on or what to call y—this but—."

He turned back toward her, and she felt something break in her chest at the look on his face.

"Any time I get to be with you is the best part of my day." Hiccup's eyebrows drew together in puzzlement. "You—you _must_ know that by now."

"You're not acting like it," she replied, unable to stop her voice from revealing the depth of her hurt, how it stung to have him immediately try to get away from her when she'd been so happy to land next to the fire, next to him.

"It's true. I— you-" Hiccup stopped abruptly,

"If...if I get to—." He stopped, tried again. "If I get to be with you at all, especially just with you—."

Did he have to smile like that, half joy and half wonderment? Now he was not fighting fair.

"But now—I can't be with you, here, right now - no, no - Astrid, listen." He stepped forward, horror on his face as he reached out towards her with his palms up, which told Astrid that the slice of pain she felt at what he'd just said had shown on her face.

Hiccup looked away briefly. "Oh, Gods. I am messing up," he muttered. She wasn't going to disagree with him there.

Then anger, or determination, or both, fixed his gaze on hers without hesitation, and he stepped forward, the intensity of his focus surrounding her.

"Astrid, if I get spend the rest of my life with you, I want it to be because it's right, for you, for both of us. Not because someone

thought we did something wrong and they make a decision _for_ you."

All the fury left her in a breath. And when she drew another, it hurt. She felt flooded with warmth, pierced by a painful, sharp, stinging joy.

Astrid moved quickly toward him, and when he tried to shift back to a defensive posture, preparing for attack, she countered by grabbing his arm and pulling him toward her.

Unprepared, Hiccup stumbled into her, but kept his balance because she was strong and held them both up. He stared down at her, looking at her hand on his chest, and at her face, so close to his. But Astrid couldn't look at him, at his expression, full of wonder and fear. It hurt too much, so she pressed her forehead against his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her and brought her closer.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice muffled.

"For what, kicking me?"

"No, you deserved that. But I shouldn't haveâ€¦ gotten so mad."

"It's ok," Hiccup said. "It's ok."

Astrid felt him kiss her hair, and her eyes burned. "Did you mean it?"

"Mean what? Which part?"

"What you just said."

"Aboutâ€¦ you? Us?" She could feel his uneven breath, his chest rising and falling in an erratic tempo the longer she stood in his arms.

She nodded. She could feel the rhythm of his heart, as unsteady as her own. "About us."

"Of course," he said, in a quiet voice.

"You should have said that part first."

"I won't make that mistake again, either."

She lifted her face toward his, and she didn't know who moved first, but it didn't matter. She didn't plan on keeping score, so long as Hiccup kept kissing her.

She wanted more hands, because she couldn't touch his face and slide her fingers through his hair _and_ grab his armor to pull him closer to her. The more she felt the warmth and strength of him, the more she wanted to explore, the more she wanted to discover. She drew back slightly, breathing fast, and looked up at Hiccup.

He looked dazed, like he had when he'd been feverish and told him a goddess was standing over her shoulder. She wanted to peek behind

her, just in case.

Hiccup brought his hand up, and with his fingertips, pushed back her bangs, then traced the skin of her cheek with the lightest touch as if she were made of something very precious that he was afraid he might break.

She covered his hand with her own in a firm grip, and he frowned, misunderstanding her. His expression cleared into simple joy when she turned her head and kissed his palm, then tightly curled her fingers over his.

"Astrid!" He looked down at her, his face half a breath from hers.

She smiled up at him, then kissed him again, briefly.

Then not so briefly.

She smiled at him, though he probably couldn't see it as their faces were so close. "Let's head back and test the Firebreather on the way. In a little while."

"That I can do," he said, not letting her go.

30. Chapter 30 - Powerful Stillness

****Powerful Stillness****

Hiccup and Astrid sat by the fire, agreeing after a brief negotiation that they would add more fuel only once. They leaned against Stormfly, with Toothless curled across from them. Both he and Stormfly had one wing raised to create a sort of shelter for all of them that held in the warmth and the light.

Astrid had her head on Hiccup's shoulder, and his arm was loose around her shoulders. Their legs were stretched out toward the flames. Astrid's were crossed at the ankles, but Hiccup kept his left leg bent under him so the metal wouldn't absorb the heat and burn Toothless later. Extending metal toward a fire was never a good idea generally unless he had tools and a barrel of water nearby.

Hiccup kept looking down to make sure she was really there. Someday his heart would slow down. Probably not that week but someday.

Hiccup, because he was Hiccup, was focused on figuring out what had happened. What that conversation had meant. What was different.

Astrid elbowed him in the ribs.

"Ow." He flinched and sat up to rub his side. Still tender.

"Stop worrying, Hiccup."

He looked over his shoulder at her. "I'm not worrying."

Astrid raised a brow and folded her arms. "I can hear your mind over

here."

He laughed, a short breath of sound.

Then he told her about his conversation with his father the night before.

"He heard me? Thor's helmet, I need to practice more."

"I don't know if he heard you or just our voices. Butâ€|yeah." Hiccup leaned back, but before he could place his arm around her again, she leaned her chin on his shoulder and slid her hands around the fingers of his left hand. Hiccup watched the flames.

"I wasn't used toâ€|worrying about you or me orâ€|. Like I said, I don't have any expectations of you."

"You can, you know," Astrid said softly, looking up at his face.

Hiccup shrugged. "But my dadâ€| what he saidâ€| I realized I had to be more aware and think about what was happening, what might happen andâ€| I'm sorry I was no good at it."

"Eh, it was your first time," Astrid said, reaching up and tickling him under his arm, digging her fingers into the fabric of his shirt beneath his armor.

Hiccup would be pleased if he never in his life made that noise again. It echoed off the mountain behind them, causing Astrid to laugh endlessly. Toothless lifted his head when Hiccup had tried to roll away from Astrid, but lowered it to his leg again and closed his eyes when he saw Hiccup wasn't in danger. "Thanks for the help, there, bud."

Once Astrid stopped laughing, wiped her face and promised she wouldn't tickle him again, Hiccup moved cautiously back toward her. This time he picked up her right hand and held it in his, keeping her other hand in view. He looked down and ran a finger over the back of her hand, mapping the scars, the bruises, and her terrible strength. He'd never looked so closely at her hand before, not while it was still, while Astrid was next to him, and not moving away.

"I really don't want anyone to decide your future for you," he said, still distracted by her hand, by her presence next to him. "And I'm sorry. I'll never do that again. I'm sorry I hurt you."

"It's ok. I'm sorry - mostly - that I hurt you."

"Thanks," Hiccup replied, his voice dry enough to use for more kindling.

"You don't have to worry, though," she continued.

"No?"

"If you just tell me what's bothering you, I can usually help."

"Oh, so it's that easy, huh?" Hiccup looked down at her. He didn't

have to look far, as she was about as tall as she was. Her head was on his shoulder and he could see the fire through her hair.

"Yep."

"And you're so good at sharing your problems, right?"

Astrid looked up and drew back a fraction, not realizing he was so close. She put a finger over his mouth. "Hush, you."

He smiled.

Then she moved her hand, spread her fingers against his cheek, her thumb tracing the scar on his chin. He could see the thousands of shades of blue in her eyes. Hiccup would be content to stay that close to her and count each color for as long as he breathed.

"I was always aware of you, you know," she said softly. Then her eyes widened. "Not in a bad way, I mean. But I always knew you wereâ€¦ up to something. I noticed."

"I didn't know. I mean, after theâ€¦ after I woke up, I... wondered, I guess. But no, I didn't know." His chest was burning, inside, like he was breathing in the fire instead of listening to Astrid. She was more dangerous to him when she was quiet and still than when she was trying to knock him down.

Astrid laughed, the sound washing over him. "Hiccup, you need to exit your own mind more often, come talk to actual people."

He still looked down at her. At the fact that she wasâ€¦ there.

"Ok," he replied softly. He moved his head slowly toward her, giving her a moment, then another, and then another, to stop him, to intercede and change his direction. He'd never moved toward her first, and it was terrifying, like the moment before he jumped off Toothless' back.

Then she made up the difference between them, a fraction of space, and pressed her lips to his. And he flew, soaring until they moved apart.

Astrid turned to her side, facing Hiccup, curling into him, her head over his heart, her arm reaching across his middle, an anchor that held her to him. He placed his arm around her again.

And he didn't feel the need to figure everything out. Not right then, anyway.

He turned his head, and kissed her hair, drowning in the knowledge that he could, that she didn't mind. She leaned closer, pulling her anchor tight against him for a moment, and sighed.

Hiccup closed his eyes, and thanked any and every god who might be listening.

****The Cold Flight Home****

When the fire had consumed the wood they added and had burned down to glowing fragments, Hiccup and Astrid stood up to leave. No one moved very quickly. Toothless and Stormfly stretched and flexed their wings, shaking off the last of the cold and preparing for the flight home. Hiccup and Astrid scattered the embers of the fire, spreading them far from one another so they'd each burn out in the cold and would not join together and ignite.

"Where's the Firebreather?"

"Over there, against the wall. I'm not entirely sure it's going to work." Hiccup tightened his armor, and pulled on his gloves.

"Well, that's hardly a surprise," Astrid replied. She lifted her hood over her hair, and re-wrapped the strings of her gauntlets, pulling them taut before winding them.

"Where should we test it, do you think?"

"At some ice? Less chance of anything catching fire than if we aim at one of the islands." Astrid turned to Stormfly to check her saddle. "What are you using for fuel?"

"This pillow somebody made me."

Astrid spun around and glared at him. He laughed.

"I wound up some old rags from the forge."

"Think they'll burn?"

"They should - they're plenty dry, even without fuel. But I don't know if they'll stay together in one piece when the hammer hits them."

"Well, that's why we're testing it."

Toothless and Stormfly were ready, legs bent low so Astrid and Hiccup could leap onto their saddles. But neither one felt like leaving the ground. They stopped, then turned to look at one another over their shoulders at the same moment.

Hiccup smiled first. "Ready?"

"Yep," Astrid replied with a grin. And then, they were airborne, slicing through the cold air away from the remnants of their fire.

They let their dragons warm up, allowing them to fly in random circles, stretching and flapping their wings.

"Which ice should we hit," Hiccup called to Astrid when she and Stormfly were level alongside Toothless.

"Try that one," she replied, pointing at an iceberg that wasn't as large as the others, but had a tall spike of ice on the side.

"I don't expect to hit any specific target. I'm not sure this thing has good aim. Or any aim at all," he said, looking down at the device in his hands.

After lowering his helmet, he loaded a bundle of fabric into the catapult, then pulled back the crossbow. He locked Toothless' tail fin so he'd be able to glide without Hiccup's assistance. Then, using a flint, he lit the fabric and placed the stock against his shoulder.

He had to lean his head away from the device lest he set his own hair on fire. "Will have to change that," he muttered to himself.

Aiming as best he could, he leaned forward over Toothless' head so nothing would fall on either of them. Then he pulled the trigger. The catapult shot forward, and dislodged the hammer beneath it so that it swung up and struck the flaming fabric. Sparks and bits of burning fiber exploded from the weapon, and dropped immediately into the water below them, getting nowhere near the iceberg.

Toothless growled, then looked up at Hiccup with a very judgmental expression.

"Yeah, I agree," Hiccup said, pushing his helmet to the top of his head and examining the weapon for any possible way to improve it.

"Well, there were sparks," Astrid said, bringing Stormfly closer to where they glided in the air. Stormfly didn't look impressed, either.

"This is true. You want to try it?"

"Ha, no, thanks. This is all you, Hiccup. I'm just here to make sure you don't do anything really stupid."

"Already did that," he said with a wry grin, feeling the hot burn on his cheeks deepen as embarrassment layered itself on top of icy wind. He studied the Firebreather more closely. Then a pebble bounced hard off the top of his helmet. He looked up, shocked.

"No, you didn't," Astrid said with a mild glare, aiming another pebble at him.

"Hey, I'm armed and dangerous over here," he said, though he moved the Firebreather away from Astrid to the far side of his body.

"Dangerous, yes," Astrid agreed with a laugh. "Armed, not so much."

Hiccup snorted. "I'll give it one more try," he said, loading the weapon. Toothless muttered and shook his head, and Stormfly and Astrid dove away from them, gliding down to rest below and behind Toothless, just above the water.

This time, it went much better. The hammer struck the flames hard enough that the fireball reached the iceberg and did so in one piece, but it lacked any real velocity. The flames did little more than bounce off the ice and land in the water with a brief sizzle.

Then the weapon fell apart in Hiccup's hands. At first, it split into two pieces, but as he tried to hold them together, the joints and edges broke apart as well, and he couldn't catch them all. Hiccup rolled his body quickly to the left, pressing down on his metal leg to turn Toothless under him enough that the falling pieces wouldn't strike Toothless' back and burn him. Toothless, figuring Hiccup wanted him to roll, continued to turn until they were both upside down, and Astrid and Stormfly rushed upward toward them.

"Wait," Astrid said, pulling Stormfly to a halt below Toothless and looking over at Hiccup. "How are you not falling off?"

"What?" Hiccup, still upside down, was brushing bits of ash and broken pieces of metal off himself and the saddle. "Oh. I redesigned the mechanism on both sides. I can lock both legs in so it's harder to fall off."

Astrid flew up for a closer look, staying slightly behind them so Stormfly wouldn't be hit by Toothless' wings. "Whoa. Can you do that to mine?"

"Of course. Bring your saddle over to the forge."

"That would be great for stunt flying," Astrid said. She leaned in to study the attachment holding Hiccup's leg.

"Yeah. So, uhâ€¦ getting lightheaded here."

"Oh, sorry." Astrid flew in a downward arc away from Toothless, who folded his wings and plummeted toward the ocean, then circled around just above the surface of the water to climb back up to the sky. When they leveled off again, Stormfly and Astrid were waiting.

Hiccup lowered his helmet and shook his head, trying to clear it. "I imagine that's what too much mead feels like."

"You've never drunk too much mead?"

"No. I don't like it much," he said.

"Wow. A viking who doesn't like mead? What's with that?" Astrid teased him, but saw him shrug, and look down quickly. "Hey, Hiccup, wait."

He and Toothless sped up, diving in tight circles toward the water at increasing speed. Astrid leaned down to Stormfly and said, "After him, girl."

Within a moment, they were just behind Toothless' tail fin, then alongside him, speeding straight through the air. If Hiccup didn't want to be caught, he wouldn't be, and Astrid knew she only had a moment before he sped up. She tapped Stormfly's shoulders with both hands, whistled quickly, stood up, turned sideways, and used Stormfly's wing to launch herself onto Toothless. He angled himself, and again she landed in front of Hiccup, who wasn't expecting her.

Only this time, she didn't land perfectly, and almost slid off Toothless' shoulder. Stormfly squawked and dove low beneath Toothless

to catch her if she fell, but Hiccup managed to grab Astrid around her waist and pull her up to him.

...

"Great Odin, Astrid! Are you crazy?" Hiccup glared at her, but Astrid paid no attention. She spun around in the saddle so she faced Hiccup, her knees over his, one leg curled around his back. Then she reached up and pushed his helmet back off his face so she could see his eyes. She wasn't gentle, either.

"Ow," he said, rubbing his hair.

"Don't look away from me, or avoid me, Hiccup. Especially if I hurt you."

"What theâ€¦!"

Astrid put her hands on his face and made sure he couldn't look away. They were flying swiftly over the surface of the water, and the moon appeared suddenly between the clouds, turning everything silver. Astrid's face was close to his, his hands were on her waist to keep her from sliding, and he could see nothing but her.

"Hiccup, you're different." He didn't speak, but he knew his expression pinched before he instinctively covered his reaction with a wry look.

"You have always been different. And listen up," she said, moving closer. "You are an extraordinary person, Hiccup. And an extraordinary viking. You're different from just about everyone else, and that's a good thing. I thought you knew that."

Hiccup shrugged, trying to look down, but unable to.

"In my opinion, which is the only one that matters right now," she said with a wide grin, which made Hiccup smile in return. "All the things that make you different are what make you amazing."

"Thanks," he said after a long moment. She kissed his cheek, then his lips, rubbing her nose gently against his.

"Any time," she said, turning and leaping onto Stormfly's back.

"Nice catch, Stormfly," Hiccup said, prompting Stormfly to shake her quills and preen a bit.

"What, nothing for me?"

"Nope, that was all her," he replied.

"Was not."

"And I am so adjusting your saddle so that you won't be able to jump off it anymore," he called down to her.

"Not going to happen, Hiccup!"

Together, laughing, they raced home.

32. Chapter 32 - Torches Burning

Torches Burning

The closer they got to Berk, the less they raced one another to get there. Toothless and Stormfly were competing with one another, and their riders encouraged them, but as the lights grew from faint pinpoints on the horizon to flickering torches, neither the dragons nor the riders were all that eager to land.

Hiccup and Toothless twisted in the air above Astrid, and he flicked a piece of burnt wood at her head as they passed over her. It bounced off her hood, but she felt it, and jerked forward to catch it before it fell into the sea. She missed.

"Hiccup," she snarled at him. He smirked at her as they glided alongside Stormfly.

"I'm unarmed now. Nothing to throw at you."

"I don't believe you," Astrid said.

"I am, I promise. Besides, you have an axe," he replied.

"I always have an axe. You should carry some sort of weapon, too, you know, especially if you're going to explore so far from Berk."

Hiccup thought of the weapon that had fallen apart in his hands. "I had one earlier."

"Why did it fall apart, do you know?"

"I think the metal got cold, and was too brittle for the heat and the impact of the hammer and catapult, but I don't know for sure." He sighed. "What am I going to tell Gobber?"

"You'll think of something."

"He's not going to be happy that I couldn't bring back any pieces."

"They sank!"

"I know."

"What if you came up with an idea inspired by his?"

Hiccup frowned. "I have been thinking about Zippleback gas," he said.

"Of course you have."

The flew over the ocean, high into the cold wind, then diving low toward the water. Stormfly and Toothless took turns firing into the night sky, then riding up and over the hot air currents they created. When the lights of Berk began to grow on the horizon, illuminating the rooftops of the village against an endless deep blue, they began

to descend.

At the same moment, they frowned, and looked at one another.

"That's a lot of torches lit for this late at night," Astrid said, reaching for her axe.

"Something's wrong."

Astrid leaned over Stormfly to look below and behind them. "I don't think it's an attack. We didn't see anyone coming in. And it doesn't seem like there's anyone around, either. It's quiet."

"Dive toward the docks and we'll come in from the western side."

They banked to the right, flying in formation toward the cove, and were about to reach Berk when they heard someone calling Hiccup's name from behind them. They slowed and spun about.

"Gobber?"

He came towards them, flying unevenly on Meatlug, who grunted.

"Good. You're back. I was just riding out to find you," he said, out of breath. When Gobber rode a dragon, anyone listening would think he was the one doing the flying.

"To find us?"

"What's wrong?" Astrid still held her axe, ready to jump.
"Outcasts?"

"No, no. No attack."

"What's going on, Gobber?"

"Back to the square," he said, leading them back to Berk. They landed in unison, Astrid and Hiccup leaping off their dragons, while Gobber slowly disconnected from the saddle and stepped off. They waited for him to explain while around them, torches were burning on every post, an unexpected and monumental use of fuel. But the village was mostly silent.

"It's Mornen," Gobber said, coming closer to them. "We found her a few hours ago. She died sometime last night."

"Oh, no," Hiccup said. Astrid gasped and put her hand on his arm.

"We have a lot to do," Gobber continued. Hiccup nodded, then looked at Astrid.

"I have to go find my mother," she said, stepping back, tucking her axe under her arm and loosening her gauntlets. She was a blur of intent movements.

"Aye," Gobber said. "She'll be looking for you. Where are the others?"

"They're camping in the haunted caves," Astrid answered.

"Ah," Gobber replied, with a narrow glance at Hiccup. "Someone will have to go get them. They'll be needed."

"I'll go find them, once I find my mother," Astrid replied, rubbing her face and cheeks to warm them.

She turned to Hiccup. "I'll see you later."

He nodded again. Astrid met his eyes, stilled a moment, then kissed his cheek before she turned and ran towards her home.

"Alright, then," Gobber said, shifting his jaw left and right. "Let's get to work."

Hiccup began removing his leather armor as he followed Gobber toward the forge. It was going to be a long night.

33. C 33: Wishing for Choices in the Journey

****Wishing for Choices in the Journey****

Death was a relatively frequent visitor to any viking tribe, between battles, war, weather, food shortages, and the general hazards of daily life. But it was rarely if ever a welcome one.

The loss of Mornen, an elder, sister of Gothi, and a very powerful woman in her own right, was felt by every member of the tribe. For Gobber and Stoick and most of the adults, the absence was sharp, as Mornen had been a constant presence in their world. For the teens, Mornen's death meant mourning, and work to prepare for her funeral, always with the shadowed reminder that they were growing older. The last major funeral in Berk, they'd been children. Now, it was their responsibility to prepare everything alongside their parents.

For Fishlegs, it was the loss of someone who understood him, and shared his curiosity about plants. His feelings of emptiness and loss were on his face, which was scrunched permanently in an effort not to cry. Snotlout and Tuffnut were quiet as well, which was rare. Even more unexpected, they didn't think to tease Fishlegs for being unable to hide his sadness. And Ruffnut, as the granddaughter of one of the best weavers in the village, was included in the task of creating Mornen's dress, the gown she would wear on her journey to the next life. Astrid and her mother and aunts were even more busy, as Mornen was of their family, and their mourning was a responsibility in and of itself.

For Hiccup and Gobber, it was a time of sad and incredible work.

Their job was to create and build the items Mornen would bring with her. Gobber had designed a staff during the time Stoick and Mornen had been so ill, and he got to work, carving and sanding it, adding metal bands and decorations befitting her status. Hiccup was in charge of other items, including a water basin, and some leather purses to hold seeds and gifts for the gods.

The night passed in a haze of heat, sparks, steam and sweat. Someone brought them food, but neither had any idea who it had been. They ate without tasting, drank water by the bucketful, and kept working.

While waiting for a band of metal to cool before shaping it, Hiccup turned to Gobber.

"What happened?"

"To Mornen?"

Hiccup nodded.

"Not sure. She'd been sick with your father, aye, but we all thought she was well. She was back in her home. But your father sent someone up to see how she was, and they found her. Died in her sleep."

Hiccup looked down, but didn't see the metal in front of him. He was remembering lifting Mornen, how her bones had felt in his hands. Maybe he should have said something then, about how frail she had been. But Gothi had been there. She must have known.

"Nothing anyone could have done," Gobber continued. "If you ask meâ€¦" He trailed off into a hum, bringing the curved crest of the staff closer to his face, inspecting the seam of the wood that would soon hold a curl of metal.

"If I ask you," Hiccup prompted.

"What? Aye. If you ask me, that's what she would have wanted. To die in her home, in her bed, in her own place. I don't question the gods, and we don't get to choose, but I do think that's what she would have wanted."

Hiccup didn't reply. He listened, gathering the tools he'd need for the next task ahead of him.

"I hope, when it's my turn," Gobber continued slowly. Hiccup's head jerked up, and he stared at Gobber.

"Everyone has to journey onward at some point, you know. No use pretending otherwise," Gobber said, looking at Hiccup over the rim of the shield he wore on his face to protect his whiskers from the fire.

Hiccup didn't want to agree, though Gobber was right. He watched as Gobber began removing thin curls of wood from the staff as he spoke.

"When it's my turn, I'd be happy to be at home, peaceful as Mornen. Death in battle would be an honor, and we've seen plenty of that. But having known peace for as long as we have now, I do appreciate the quiet."

Hiccup pressed his lips together to keep from commenting on the idea of Gobber loving quiet.

"I've never thought about it," he said instead.

34. Chapter 34: Knowing the Good Differences

****Knowing the Good Differences****

When the first light of dawn brushed the sky with faint pink on the horizon, Hiccup walked home. His first task was finished, but he needed sleep before starting the next, or he'd fall asleep on the fire pit. Gobber had already gone home to rest and would be back in a few hours. He told Hiccup to go as well, but Hiccup knew he wouldn't be able to relax unless he finished the water basin first.

It was done, and he was quietly proud of it. The wooden sides were wrapped with polished metal that gleamed. He'd scratched the metal bands with sharpened steel so when the light hit them, it looked as if waves of water traveled the sides in an endless tide. He'd added items that represented Berk and Mornen's life. Carved plants wrapped around the rim with metal leaves affixed to each stem, and a curve of burnt metal that mimicked the shape of Mornen's roof was fused to the front and back to act as a handle. Images of other plants and trees were burnt into the wood along with hidden figures representing the different gods.

The morning song of Berk that followed him home was missing a layer. The birds were exclaiming over breakfast, the wind slid through the snow-covered trees in a muffled hush, and wood cracked and sparked in the village fires, but the music they made was hollow. No one was out on their normal path, calling out greetings on their way to the docks or to the forest. No voices sang while cooking; no axes were chopping wood. Everyone was awake, but no one went about their usual jobs. There was no need to ask how the neighbors were. They knew, because they felt the same loss. That morning, Berk lacked a piece of its heart.

He wondered as he walked who would care for Mornen's home, and her garden. He couldn't imagine anyone living there now that Mornen had died, but the plants she grew kept the village alive, and would need to be cared for daily. Hiccup figured his dad had thought of it already, but he'd ask him later. Probably Fishlegs would be able to help.

The walk up to his home took much longer than he'd thought it would, and when he reached the steps, there was enough light in the sky to cast a shadow across the door. It was so large, Hiccup thought for a moment his father was behind him, but when he turned, he was alone.

Definitely time for bed.

Hiccup's home was empty, as he expected it to be, and the sound of the door closing behind him echoed in the stillness as he climbed the stairs to his room. He didn't know where his dad was but he figured he wouldn't hear the door open and close for hours. He'd be alone, able to rest, to hide for awhile.

He was so tired, his metal leg caught on a floorboard, a mistake he hadn't made in years. He stumbled onto his bed, catching himself on his hands, and found himself looking at a dragon.

A small one. A small, perfectly made black fabric dragon.

Not just any dragon.

Toothless.

Hiccup sat down and lifted it into his palm.

The wings were made of leather, each panel sewn with such skill that the stitches barely showed. The body was fabric, maybe sail cloth, dyed to a bottomless black. The tiny spines on the back, also leather, and the wings were joined carefully, and it was stuffed with something that gave the dragon weight, but a smooth and firm body.

The eyes were sewn with yellow and green twists of thread, and the mouth curved into a slight smile, a tiny hint of pink at the corners. Hiccup smiled back. He knew that expression well.

Then he turned the dragon in his hand to face the window. The tail, which curved alongside the dragon's body, was identical to the one he flew with every day. Dark leather formed the contours of Toothless' tail, and dyed red cloth was sewn tightly against it, forming the fin that Hiccup had made.

Astrid had clearly figured out how to join leather to cloth.

When had she left this? After he'd flown north to Svenson's Island? She must have, because the dragon hadn't been there when he'd last been in his room, and he'd flown to the academy and told her his plans immediately afterward.

He placed the dragon on his pillow, and leaned over to unstrap his leg. He pulled up his blanket, and made himself comfortable, laying on his back to look up at the window above him. He held the dragon on his chest, running a fingertip over the leather fins on the back, watching the light increase across the sky.

Then the sky out the window turned black.

"Hey, Toothless."

With a growl and a thump, Toothless leapt into the room, tapping the window covering with his tail so it closed behind him. He didn't go immediately to his bed, though. He sniffed the air, then put two legs on Hiccup's bed, leaned over him, and sniffed at the toy dragon. Hiccup held it up a bit, away from Toothless' nose so he could see it better.

"Like it?"

Toothless narrowed his eyes and growled, then brought his nose closer and sniffed the dragon's wings.

"Yeah, Astrid made it."

Toothless gave a low rumbling purr and looked up at Hiccup, who put his hand on Toothless' head and scratched beneath his chin. Toothless rumbled at him, then pushed back from Hiccup's bed and went over to his own.

It was like the end of any other day, except not. Hiccup's bed was the same, his pillow was the same. His room was the same, really.

But everything was upside down. It was morning, not night. And Hiccup wasn't the same.

So much had changed since he had last been in his room. So much was different. Nearly everything.

Mornen was gone. Everything would change in her absence, and the time of preparation and mourning would consume everyone's time and attention.

Astrid had been in his room again, and left him another gift. She'd put it there before she left Berk, before they fought, before they stopped fighting, and then weren't fighting at all, except maybe for air.

She'd been in his arms. She'd tried to knock him off a cliff. She'd listened. She'd kissed him.

Hiccup closed his eyes, his hand over the cloth dragon on the bed beside him. Some of the differences hurt, but the othersâ€¦

The other differences were good.

35. Chapter 35: A Request

****A Request****

Planning the funeral required a full tribal meeting, with much to be decided. On the morning of the meeting, which was expected to take up most of the afternoon, Stoick and Hiccup walked up the hill towards Mornen's home to check the garden. It was the deepest part of winter in Berk, when it seemed like the cold would never end, and even with Hiccup's ice pick, it was slow going for them both. They didn't say much, most of their breath needed to move them over the snow where the air was thinner.

Mornen had had no fear of heights, Hiccup thought to himself, though why she refused to consider riding a dragon even once was a mystery to him. And it would remain a mystery. Maybe as she approached the life beyond this one, she'd fly with a dragon.

When they arrived, the garden had already been looked after. Fresh straw and rags covered the beds, holding the snow against the earth, which Mornen used to say was the blanket of winter protecting her plants. The cloth wall that blocked the sea wind was whole again, with all tears and rips recently mended. When Stoick had last been there, he'd said the fabric had been ripped and the snowy garden bare of any covering. Thus the reason for their visit today.

"Someone's been busy," Stoick said.

"Yeah, it looks that way," Hiccup replied, looking closely at the stitches. They were uneven, in all different directions, but they were strong, and they would hold.

"Was it Fishlegs?" Stoick asked him, looking around at the garden, and at the house.

"I don't think so, no," Hiccup replied. "I'll ask him."

"Hmmm. Well, good that it's done. Time to go back. Lots to do."

Stoick turned and started down the hill, and Hiccup followed after a moment, looking at the door to Mornen's home, knowing her last breath had been inside.

It was time to escort her to the next life.

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During the meeting, which everyone knew would be one of several, most of the people of Berk had something to say, an idea to present as to how they'd complete the funeral. It was an important, and careful process, because they had to fulfill Mornen's wishes, which would prove difficult, while also completing the rituals in a way that was suitable for the role and place she held within Berk, and in a way that appeased and respected the gods. Hiccup sat in his usual spot at the council table, taking notes and drawing on a separate piece of paper. Because the entire village was present, and because Mornen had been of Astrid's family, she and her mother and aunts, and any and every other relative, stood behind Stoick. This meant that Astrid appeared to be paying attention, when really she was watching Hiccup sketch.

He was drawing Mornen.

She'd thought at first he was drawing another map of Berk, with the mountain in the center, and wondered where he was planning to go. But when he added rows of charcoal lines in different widths and patterns, she recognized it. She'd been in Mornen's garden so often, as a girl when she'd visited with her mother, and on her own when she was older. It never changed. Mornen changed, Astrid had changed, but the garden, even with new plants, always looked the same. It was comforting.

And so it was to see it captured in Hiccup's notebook. Seeing each plant appear beneath his hand, and watching the drawing take shape even as he paused to write down more ideas on a separate sheet of paper, eased some of the tension and sadness that had taken up too much space inside her. Each step of preparation, all the things she and her family had been doing, hadn't lessened that feeling. It grew worse. And she couldn't go practice or throw her axe at a tree until she felt better. They all had too much to do.

When Hiccup began to draw Mornen, tears stung Astrid's eyes, the thick sadness rising in her throat and threatening to erupt.

She swallowed it down, but it didn't help.

Hiccup started with Mornen's back, her arm holding a curved and decorated staff Astrid had never seen before. Then he sketched the bend of her legs beneath her cloak, the edge of it brushing the strongest plants as she faced the newest ones, the tips of their

leaves barely breaking through the dirt. He drew Mornen's arm over the new seedlings, blessing them and inviting them to live, and Astrid smiled. The way he'd drawn her arm made her seem both patient and demanding, exactly how Mornen had been with every living creature.

Then he began to sketch her head, her hair wound into a crown on her head, her face turned away as she looked up toward the mountain behind her. Hiccup had known her, too, had seen her in her garden enough to capture her perfectly. He probably understood how Astrid was feeling. No, she thought. He definitely did.

A quiet sob escaped from Astrid's throat, and she coughed to cover it as tears filled her eyes. She didn't know if it was the pain at losing Mornen, who had been among the women of Astrid's family since her earliest memories, or at the brilliant, quiet way Hiccup had remembered her, but it hurt. It all hurt. She wiped her eyes on her gauntlet and tried to breathe normally.

Then she felt a hand on her back. She looked up. Her mother rested a hand on her shoulder, looking down at her with a sad smile. She reached down and kissed Astrid's hair, brushing her braid away from her face like she always did, and Astrid felt some of the choking sadness recede. Then they turned and listened to what was being said.

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After the meeting, Astrid's family conferred with the council and with Stoick about the arrangements they would all manage, and Hiccup excused himself, taking his notebook with him.

Astrid slipped away as soon as she was able to, and ran up the hill toward the forge after Hiccup. He turned when he heard her call his name.

"Hey. What are you doing here?"

"Your drawing." The remaining thickness in her throat made it hard for her to breathe and run at the same time, so she paused a moment.

"My drawing?"

"Mornen. You drew Mornen."

"You saw that? Oh. Yeah. You were all behind me. I'm sorry," he said, his ears turning pink.

"No, no, it's ok. Who is it for?"

"The drawing? I was going to give it to your mother, if you thought she'd like to have it. I'd give it to you, though, to give to her."

Astrid looked up at him. "Not going to give it to her yourself?"

"No," Hiccup said instantly. "She's almost as scary as you are."

"Thanks." Astrid felt herself smile, a real smile that was so surprising, her cheeks hurt for a moment.

"I have one for Fishlegs, too. And you."

"For me?"

"Yes, of course."

"Th- thank you." Astrid's breath still refused to settle, and she was getting angry about it. She'd try to draw a breath smoothly, and a sob would interrupt, teasing her with imminent humiliation. Hiccup moved closer and put a hand on her arm.

"You ok?"

"Yeah, yeah. I will be." He slid his arm around her and she leaned toward him, unable to resist, though his kindness undid her efforts to avoid crying. She closed her eyes and put her arms around him, her head on his shoulder. Hiccup moved her closer still and his warmth eased the awful, churning sadness. She could breathe, though her eyes kept disobeying her, tears seeping through and running down her face.

Hiccup didn't say anything, just stood with her, allowing her to lean on him until she moved away to stand on her own. Seeing his face as she wiped her cheeks with hurried movements reminded her why she'd come after him.

"Could you draw one more, for me?"

"Sure. You need two?"

"No, no. It'sâ€¦ it's for someone else. But I can't say who."

Hiccup's eyebrows lowered. "You can't say?"

"No. And I can't give it to â€¦this person. I have to hide it, so a small sketch would be better."

"You can't say who it's for, but you can't give it to them, either?"

Astrid nodded, too exhausted to argue with him. But Hiccup didn't get angry, or even suspicious. He didn't understand, but he agreed.

He trusted her so completely.

The warmth she felt from his embrace continued to spread through her.

"I'll have it for you tomorrow."

36. Chapter 36 - New Traditions

****New Traditions****

Most of the forge work had been completed, though Hiccup still spent long hours by the fire pit, sharpening swords and picks. Mornen had requested that her route to the next life be over the sea, and they were going to try to break the ice enough to allow her that journey. Everyone brought their strongest weapons to the forge, and Gobber and Hiccup sharpened every piece to a deadly gleaming edge. If there were enemies other than the ice that day, those enemies wouldn't stand a chance.

That morning, he'd finished the sketches of Mornen, so he found Astrid in the great hall during dinner so he could give them to her. She was at the end of a bench, but she moved over and made room for him so he could sit with her.

Pushing her plate aside, she looked at the drawings Hiccup handed her.

"Oh, these areâ€¦" she trailed off, looking closely at a sketch of Mornen standing with Gothi during the last Thawfest. Hiccup had drawn them looking at one another, and their usual expressions of wary affection made Astrid smile.

"My mother is going to love this."

She turned to the next one. This sketch had Mornen in her garden again, her hands on her hips, frowning down at a plant. Astrid started to laugh, and covered her mouth.

"Dad and I visited her once, and she was yelling at her garden," Hiccup said, looking over Astrid's shoulder at the papers she'd spread out on the table. Astrid glanced up at him, still smiling, but with tears in her eyes. He felt awful.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to-"

"No, Hiccup. It's good. It's ok. These are perfect."

She turned to the last paper, the smallest one. On it, Mornen was sitting in her chair next to her front door, looking down the hill with a somewhat sour look on her face, ready to greet whomever was making the trek up the hill to see her with warm biscuits and wry comments. Astrid sighed.

"I saw that expression so often."

"Me, too," Hiccup said quietly. "Every trip up that mountain."

"I think we all did," she replied. She flipped the paper over. "It's not signed?"

"No, you said you didn't want to give it to...whoever yourself, so I figured I shouldn't sign it."

"Oh, no. This is yours. Please sign it." She passed it back to him.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

Hiccup took his charcoal from his pocket and turned the page over. Turning the charcoal so the narrowest edge faced the paper, he drew a tiny H and wound the 3 through it. He blew the dust away, then passed the paper back to Astrid.

"This is perfect. He won't -"

"He?"

Astrid closed her eyes. "Thor almighty. What is wrong with me?"

Hiccup was usually honest with himself, and though he didn't like that she wouldn't tell him who the drawing was for, it didn't matter, really. He trusted her, could always count on her honesty. If she didn't want to tell, she had a good reason, and that was enough. Astrid never used lies or tricks to get what she wanted. He always saw her coming, trying to be fair in everything she did. Even if she was trying to kick his legs out from under him, she told him why. And she always faced him when she did it.

Hiccup shook his head, shrugging. "It's ok, I know. You can't tell me."

He could probably make her tell him, nudge her until she confided in him, but he didn't need to. He could guess - he already had a pretty good idea.

Astrid turned her head and looked at him closely. He still felt that buoyant joy when she looked at him, knowing that she saw him clearly. Even now, when sadness covered everything like ice over the sea, he had to work to conceal how he felt when she held his gaze and focused on him. He didn't know what she saw on his face, but her frown disappeared.

"Thank you."

Hiccup didn't think she was talking about the drawings, so he couldn't stop himself from asking. "What are you thanking me for?"

She paused, still watching his face carefully. He was going to start turning red if she didn't stop soon.

"For being kind. Being you."

Too late. He could feel his face heating up.

He was no less confused, but he replied. "You're welcome."

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The next day brought another meeting, because their attempts to break the ice had failed. Stoick brought up an older tradition, burning within the boat on a far side of the mountain. Gothi frowned, but didn't reject the idea outright. She looked toward her family, who clearly felt the same conflict. Astrid stood in the same spot as the day before, and looked up at her mother. It was not what Mornen had wanted, but it wasn't possible to wait until the thaw, either.

"I know this is difficult, and I am sorry for it," Stoick was saying. "But we cannot break the ice."

Suddenly Hiccup sat up straight. "Wait a minute."

Stoick looked at him, surprised. Hiccup didn't speak up at council without careful thought first, and usually after bringing his ideas to his father first so he could introduce them to the council. Seeing Hiccup interrupt a discussion was a rare event, but Stoick gestured for him to continue. Astrid saw Hiccup swallow hard once he realized the attention of the council and of the rest of the village behind them was focused on him. The silence of their expectation seemed painful, and Astrid knew he was berating himself for speaking before thinking first.

Hiccup turned slightly away from the council, and faced Gothi.

"May I make a suggestion?" She looked at him with eyebrows raised and lifted her palms toward him.

"What ifâ€¦would it be acceptable if the dragons flew the ship to the open water south of us? If we all rode, and the strongest dragons carried the ship to the water, we could bring Mornen to the sea, justâ€¦not the sea here at Berk."

Gothi frowned, and a murmur spread through the crowd as the people in the front shared Hiccup's suggestion with those who hadn't heard him.

"If Mornen wanted to go by water, we can bring her to the water," Hiccup said to his father. "The ice didn't arrive in the harbor too long ago. We should be able to find the edge of the ice covering within a half day's flight."

Stoick nodded slowly, considering the idea. "Can we carry the ship?"

Hiccup looked over at Gobber, who wore an expression similar to Hiccup's when he was calculating something in his head.

"Aye, we should," Gobber replied.

"What would we need, then?" Stoick had folded his arms across his chest, one hand pulling at the braid on his chin.

"We may have to make more chains and borrow ropes from the fishermen, but it can be done."

Stoick looked back at Hiccup. "Can the dragons lift the ship? Are there enough?"

Hiccup was writing something in his notebook, and didn't look up.

"Aye," he replied, imitating his father and Gobber without realizing it. Stoick jerked back and glanced at Gobber, who tried not to laugh. Hiccup looked up at his father again, unaware of what he'd just said. "They should be able to, if we balance out the weight across different breeds."

Then Hiccup turned his head, looking over his shoulder. "What do you think, Astrid?"

"Absolutely, they can," she replied, pushing her hair out of her eyes with the back of one hand.

The murmur grew as everyone talked at once. Dragons flying the ship to the sea was far outside the tradition, but it allowed them to honor Mornen's wishes. Astrid wasn't able to hear everyone from where she stood, but the collective tones of their voices seemed curious and thoughtful, not angered or outraged.

Stoick stood and held up his hands for quiet. He looked over at Gothi, who again looked at her family, this time with a pleased expression. Then Gothi turned to Hiccup and Stoick and nodded her agreement.

"It is decided," Stoick said. "We will fly Mornen to the next life on the backs of dragons, and bring her to the sea. Who is with us?"

The room erupted with voices echoing in agreement, and Astrid heard her mother taking in a slow, serrated breath behind her, trying to hold her in tears. She knew the feeling, so she didn't turn to look.

Then Stoick turned to Hiccup. "You have something to add."

It wasn't a question.

Astrid's eyes widened, and her breath halted in a short gasp. Hiccup had been looking at his notebook, eyes unfocused, lips moving slightly, probably calculating the length of chain and types of dragons needed, wind speed, optimal flight route, and anything else he considered important. He was not paying attention, and when his father spoke and the room fell silent again, he looked up and froze. His cheeks stained red, and she saw his shoulders slump inward slightly, his instinct to fold in on himself and look at the ground.

But Stoick's statement offered no alternative. He expected Hiccup to speak. So Hiccup stood, and Astrid saw his fingers go white as he gripped his notebook.

He cleared his throat, lifted his shoulders back, and took a breath. Astrid pressed her fist against her stomach, imagining Hiccup must feel an even bigger knot in his.

He wasn't interested in speeches, Astrid knew, though he was growing used to speaking to larger groups. At the academy, he rarely went for inspirational talks, but was always practical, explaining how everyone could do what he did. This moment was no different.

His voice didn't carry as far as Stoick's, but he did his best.

"W- we look after each other," he said. "We look after Mornen now, because she looked after us."

Behind him, where he couldn't see, Gothi nodded, eyes narrowed in a way that always made Astrid nervous. Hiccup continued, after clearing his throat.

"We take care of the dragons, and they take care of us. We're all p-part of Berk now. So it's fitting that we fly Mornen from the backs of our dragons, and bring her to the sea. We can do this, for Mornen, if we work together."

Gothi tapped her staff on the stone floor, creating a cracking sound that made everyone look at her. She nodded firmly.

"Aye," Stoick echoed. "Let's get to work."

Hiccup sat down in a hurry, blew out a breath and rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. Then he opened his notebook and started writing, probably listing all the equipment they'd need for each dragon. Astrid could see his ears and neck were very red, and he'd allowed his shoulders to slump forward so his body curved above the table, so he took up less space.

Astrid felt awful for him, and was increasingly angry on his behalf the more she thought about it.

She didn't think to clear her expression when Stoick turned to leave. He caught her glaring at him, and his eyes widened in shock. She looked down at the floor quickly, but not quickly enough.

Oh, Gods.

That was not good.

37. Chapter 37: Astrid Out of Bounds

****Astrid Out of Bounds****

Later that same day, when light was still visible in its low slide across the horizon, Stoick paid Astrid's family a visit. He filled the doorway and removed his helmet out of respect. When she saw him, Astrid felt like her heart wanted to punch through her body and run away - and she wanted to go with it.

He came to discuss the funeral, to ask questions that only her mother and aunts could answer. The longer they sat at the table, the worse Astrid's nervousness grew, until she could barely keep her body still. Her skin vibrated with the effort of managing too many emotions - she didn't need guilt on top of them. She sat as still as possible, hoping he'd leave.

Then Stoick stood up.

"I need to discuss the flight arrangements."

Oh, thank the Gods.

"May Astrid accompany me, as she knows both the dragons and your family's wishes?"

Her mother agreed without even thinking about it, but Astrid knew.

She was in trouble.

She picked up her axe and held it across her body with both hands as she followed Stoick out the door of her home. He didn't speak, not while they were walking, which only made Astrid feel increasingly ill. She'd been disrespectful, and she knew it, and she was ready to apologize, but he was the chief. He had to speak first.

They didn't head toward the dragon stables, though. They headed up the side path that wound along the eastern side of Berk toward the forest. In the summer, it was an alternate route to the hot springs, but in winter, it wasn't used much at all. It was too steep for regular foot traffic.

That didn't stop Stoick, though. He kept walking up the hill toward the first small group of trees, Astrid keeping pace behind him.

Did he need to be this far out of town to yell at her? No wonder Hiccup hated having long talks with his father.

Then Stoick stopped just inside the small copse of pines. It was above his home, and she could see the rooftops of Berk, which meant anyone in the village could see them, if they were looking. If she was about to get yelled at, at least it would be a semi-private humiliation.

She started taking deep breaths, slowly in and longer out, to remain calm as long as possible. She didn't want to lose her temper with the chief.

Stoick turned to her, and in a deep, quiet voice said, "You first."

"Sir?"

He gestured to his left. A large tree had fallen, roots torn from the ground, and it rested at an angle, propped up on some other trees.

"You throw first."

She stared at him for a moment, confused. Then she did as he asked. She did have her axe with her, after all.

Astrid took a step forward, aimed, threw, and buried the axe in the fattest part of the trunk. She smiled, a quick flash across her face before she smoothed her features. Then she ran over, yanked the axe out and walked back to the chief.

He gestured for her axe and she handed it over, stepping to the side quickly.

He lifted it in his hand, twirled it through his fingers, then threw it at the same fallen tree.

"Nice axe," he said. Astrid stood, frozen and not sure what to do, as Stoick walked over and retrieved the axe, then brought it back to her.

"Your turn," he said. Astrid looked at him, then prepared to throw again.

No big deal, just throwing axes with the chieftain.

Astrid had carefully developed her ability to block out distractions to improve her aim. Whether she was using an axe or an arrow or a spear, she could narrow her focus to the target and, usually, split that target in two.

She aimed her axe, tumbled forward, flipping herself over, then threw from a kneeling position.

THUNK

The axe was embedded into the bark, and the handle quivered.

She ran over to get it, then brought it back.

Astrid offered the axe to Stoick, but he had his own. He threw it, landing it atop the curve of the fallen tree. He brought it back, and gestured to Astrid.

This was so weird.

She shrugged, but kept throwing. They took turns, and she blocked out his presence. Mostly.

Split the bark, cut the tree.

Throw.

Perfect.

Split the bark, cut the tree.

Again.

When she ran over to extract the axe from the tree after her sixth or seventh throw, she had to hop up onto the fallen tree trunk to maneuver the blade out.

She glanced over her shoulder at the chief, then hopped down and walked back over to him.

As glad as she was to have axe throwing time, his presence wasn't helping. Axe throwing wasn't helping either. None of it was. She felt the painful tide rise up her throat, still aching and sad, worried for her family, and...angry. Really angry. And worried and sick of grieving and tired and everything that came with mixing all those feelings.

"OK, out with it," Stoick said behind her.

"Out with what?"

"You're so irritated, your hair is turning red. So, out with it. What's wrong?"

Astrid looked at him suspiciously.

"Pretend for a moment I'm not the chief. "

Astrid gave him a look that communicated the likelihood of her forgetting that, especially after the previous night.

"I'm also Hiccup's father. You're angry with me and probably it has something to do with Hiccup."

Astrid looked down at the ground, trying to find more courage.

"Astrid, I'll no' ask again."

"You â€¦."

She exploded.

"You knew it would embarrass him, and you did it anyway, and don't you understand how awful that is?"

"What?"

"He spoke up, came up with a perfect idea, and then you had to ask him to make a speech. Why did you do that?"

"You're worried about him."

"No. Yes. _Yes_ - but that's not what I'm angry."

Stoick waited.

"I'm angry at you because youâ€¦ oh, this is a bad idea. I'm sorry." Astrid dropped the axe blade to the snow and pressed her hands flat against her legs. "I'm sorry I was rude."

He folded his arms across his chest, looking like one of the trees behind him. "No, Astrid. Explain, please."

"This is not my place."

"I'm making it your place by asking you."

Astrid took a deep breath, and figured if she was in trouble, she might as well be honest.

"Hiccup can't stand up and just talk to a large group. If you put him on the spot, he doesn'tâ€¦ speak as quickly."

Stoick frowned. "I know that. But he'd just spoken to the whole tribe. And his idea was brilliant."

"No, he spoke to Gothi. He didn't address everyone. He spoke to her."

Stoick's eyebrows dropped slightly.

"His idea _was_ brilliant. Most of his ideas usually are. But you can't throw him into the middle of a situation that's potentially hostile or precarious or involves the entire village and justâ€¦ tell him to speak. Hiccup watches from the outside, then figures out everyone's weaknesses and strengths. Then he plans. He doesn't..."

walk into the middle and silence everyone by roaring."

"You think that's what I do?"

"Sir, I know that's what you do. I've been there."

"So you think I ought let him sit and watch?"

"No, he can't, not in every situation. It would be misinterpreted. He has to stand with you."

Stoick nodded, eyes narrowing. "You understand."

"_Of course_ I understand!" Astrid dug her fingers into her hair. Stoick gave her a strange look, and she wasn't sure why.

"Hiccup is going to be chief," Stoick continued.

"I understand that, too. And so does he. But you...you can't teach people to expect that Hiccup will be a chief just like you. That he'll do things exactly as you do."

"Of course he won't." Stoick laughed at the idea.

"So when you throw Hiccup in front of everyone and command him to speak to the whole tribe without preparing or warning him, you build the expectation that he'll be like you. And Hiccup knows that. Andâ€¦" She trailed off.

She'd been about to say, _He hates to disappoint you_, but it wasn't her place to speak for Hiccup. She could speak only for herself.

"What do you suggest exactly?"

Astrid looked at Stoick. He wasn't speaking softly as if he were about to erupt, the way he had when he asked Snotlout what _exactly_ he'd done with the Berk ceremonial spear when he took it fishing and lost it.

He sounded like he was...asking her opinion.

"Leave room for Hiccup's way of doing things if you're going to delegate to him like that. In front of everyone."

"What do you mean?"

"Hiccup isn't you. He's not going to _be_ you."

"Aye."

"He has to figure out his own wayâ€¦ if you want him to succeed."

"Of course I want him to succeed," Stoick replied, eyes narrowing. "I can't always warn him before he has to speak, though."

"No, you can't, butâ€¦ sometimes you can."

Stoick folded his arms over his massive chest and looked down at

her.

"Oh, gods. Am I in big trouble now?"

Stoick laughed suddenly, a booming sound that echoed off the trees.

"No." He smiled at her. "Do you know that you used to glare at me when you were a baby?"

"I did?"

"Aye. Looked very familiar when I turned around yesterday. Thought I'd gone back in time."

"I'm sorry about that, sir."

He lowered his chin, almost a nod, and she knew it was an acceptance of her apology. Then he continued. "I don't know if you didn't like red hair or if I was too loud, but whenever there'd be a tribe meeting, you'd be there, strapped to your mother, peeking over her shoulder. Whenever I started talking, you'd glare at me. Tiny little thing you were, but you were fierce. And you weren't afraid to show it."

Astrid laughed despite herself. "That hasn't changed."

"No, no, it hasn't. But one night, while you were frowning at me, I saw Hiccup, who was sitting with his mother. He wasn't much bigger than you were, and he was shocked. Absolutely stunned. Big eyes, mouth open, gaping at this tiny person who looked ready to attack. He looked at me, then at you, and then— I remember it so clearly. He grabbed a handful of his mother's hair, pulled himself up a bit, and tried to glare back at you. But he didn't know how. So he imitated your expression. Oh, it was funny."

"I never knew this."

"You were both far too young to remember any of it. But I do. I saw it. So did Hiccup's mother. We laughed about it later."

Stoick paused with a faint, far away smile on his face.

"And you saw, too. You noticed Hiccup trying to intimidate you, so you scowled at him, so bad you frightened him. He ducked back behind his mother's shoulder. Then, when you went back to glaring at me, he leaned forward to watch you. Not mad, just ...curious."

"That sounds like Hiccup."

"Aye. And after that, every meeting, he always watched to see what you'd do. Any time you were both in the same place, he'd watch you, keep you in sight. Were you going to attack? Were you plotting something?"

"I swear, sir, I have no plots against you," Astrid said quickly.

Stoick laughed, another roar of sound that made Astrid flinch before she could laugh as well.

"I know you don't. But Hiccup, he wasn't sure about that at the time, so he was always watching."

Astrid had no memory of any of this. Her family hadn't noticed, or they'd have teased her about it.

But she did know that, as far back as she could remember, she was always aware of Hiccup. And that he watched her. Maybe she did have baby battle plans against Stoick and he knew it, and had been plotting his defense.

"Vikings like you are rare, Astrid," Stoick said. He paused, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Berk is fortunate to have you."

Astrid stood up straight as if stung. She didn't know what to say.

"And so is Hiccup."

She did not know what to say to that, either.

"You're right. About Hiccup."

Astrid nodded.

"Now. Can I borrow your axe? I want to beat your throw."

"You're on, sir."

Astrid didn't beat him. But she came close, she told herself. Sort of.

When they walked down the hill a few minutes later, she felt better. Axes and talking, probably.

But mostly the axes.

38. Ch 38: Waiting, Preparing, and Dreaming

****Waiting, Preparing, and Dreaming****

Hiccup finished his dinner and was headed upstairs to sleep when his father came home.

"Evening, dad," he said. He fixed a plate for him and brought it to his chair along with mead and water.

"Have a seat, son. Please."

Hiccup was exhausted and about to argue but his father's "please" made him stop. "Ok," he said, cautiously.

"About the dragons."

Hiccup got comfortable, and grabbed his notebook.

"How many do you think you'll need?"

"As many as possible, to make it easiest for them. If all the advanced dragon riders, the adults who've been flying for more than a year or two, and the highest level riders in the academy join together, we should have enough to lift the ship and bring it to the sea without a problem."

"How can those who don't fly join us?"

Hiccup thought a moment. It would be important for everyone, especially Mornen's family, to see the ship in the water heading toward the horizon, but not all of them knew how to fly. Even Gothi, despite having an increasing number of Terrible Terrors in her home living with her, had never ridden a dragon.

"If those who are not lifting the ship can each take a passenger, and Gobber and I can design some harnesses to keep everyone connected, we should have enough to bring everyone with us. Can we leave the village empty?"

Stoick nodded, swallowing some mead. "It won't be too long, and word has probably spread. Even those who would attack us normally would never do so during Mornen's funeral. They'd fear the gods' outrage, and her revenge from the afterlife."

Hiccup shuddered. "Yeah, I would, too."

"So we can make this happen," Stoick said.

Hiccup nodded. His dad looked like he was waiting him to say something more, but Hiccup had no idea what he wanted.

"Hiccup," Stoick began, then stopped. "I'd like you to speak at the funeral."

"Me?"

"Aye," Stoick replied with a small smile that Hiccup couldn't interpret. "We'll complete the rites here, then fly Mornen to the sea. Not everyone would hear if we did it from the air."

Hiccup looked down at the fire, frowning.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want me to say something?"

Stoick started counting on his fingers, and Hiccup immediately regretted asking. When he needed a list of reasons, his father had twenty or thirty fingers.

"First, you're the future chief. It's appropriate."

Hiccup had known that was going to be the first reason, but was curious about the rest.

"Second, this was your idea. And it's a good one. A very good one. But there are some who still question the use of dragons, who fear them. That's understandable. You're better able to explain how we

bring the dragons into our village, into what we do."

Hiccup could not have been more shocked.

"Third, this is one of our oldest rituals. It's important. It's important for Berk, for Mornen, for the gods. You brought the dragons here. You and the dragons will show us how bring Mornen to the next world."

Hiccup sat frozen in his chair, stunned.

"And finally, " Stoick continued.

Oh, good, only four reasons. He could go to bed sooner than he thought.

"Mornen's family asked if you would."

"They did?"

"Aye, they did. I can't refuse. They're right to ask."

Hiccup didn't like the idea much, but he couldn't refuse, either. And his dad's reasons weren't wrong, though he could have argued with him until that last point.

So he nodded and went up to bed trying not to think about it too much.

Sleep was difficult to find, unfortunately, despite his exhaustion. He heard the crackle of the wood as his father spread the embers of their fire across the pit, then the creak of Stoick's bed as he went to his own chamber to sleep. He heard Toothless snoring softly, and the wind sliding across the roof.

Those noises were usually soothing, like a blanket made of sound that told him he was safe, that it was time to sleep, but rest remained elusive. Hiccup tried to get comfortable, but couldn't. He thought about strapping his leg back on to go take a walk, except the cold outside would wake him up - and he would wake his father.

Then he realized he wasâ€|waiting for something, expecting to hear a sound on the roof that he knew would not be coming. Hiccup looked up to the window above his bed and understood what his problem was: he wanted to talk to Astrid. He wanted to let the confusion out of his head, to share it with her, knowing she'd listen, and understand, and help him put his thoughts back in order.

He missed her.

There was no chance she'd sneak out tonight. She and her family probably weren't sleeping much, and were working closely together. And there was no possible way he could visit her, not at this hour.

But thinking of Astrid soothed some of the racing disorder in his mind as he imagined what she'd say to him. Hearing her voice so clearly in his imagination made him smile into the darkness, and he fell asleep dreaming of her.

â€|

The morning of Mornen's funeral began under dark blue skies scattered with stars, the air clear and cold. Hiccup had been up before most of the village, finishing the extra harnesses, and making sure they had enough chains and ropes ready to lift Mornen's ship.

When the sun rose, Fishlegs, Snotlout, the twins and every other available rider went to the academy to feed the dragons, and Toothless had followed them. They'd need all the fish they could eat to manage the task ahead of them.

Hiccup had explained to Toothless what the plan was, and while he was never sure if Toothless understood absolutely everything he said, he knew Toothless fully comprehended what was being asked of the dragons that day. And he knew Toothless could communicate to the others what was happening.

But Hiccup was still nervous. It was a big ship, and while it held only Mornen's body, it would also hold everything they'd prepared for her, and the load would be very heavy. Snotlout, Tuffnut and Ruffnut had flown south the day before, and reported that they'd found the edge of the ice and large areas of open water between icebergs about an hour or so away. But it would be a longer flight when they carried the ship, and Hiccup was concerned - about the time, the journey, the weight, and that they'd never done this before.

If it didn't go well, it would be seen as a bad omen against the dragons, and Hiccup was most concerned about that. He didn't want anything to go wrong, and was trying to think of every possible outcome to make sure the journey went according to plan. His mind was full, spinning around all the different scenarios and solutions he'd come up with for any foreseeable problem.

When it was time to gather the village, Hiccup had already put on extra layers beneath his leather flight armor, and brought blankets with him for whomever flew with him and Toothless. He figured it would be one of Astrid's aunts, as he knew Astrid and her mother would be with Stormfly. There had been some muttering about Mornen's family carrying her ship, that it was improper, but Astrid's mother had insisted, and the muttering had stopped immediately. Apparently Hiccup wasn't the only one who thought she was scary.

The dragons were already waiting in the plaza, saddled and wearing the additional harnesses that would attach chains to the ship. The chains would be hooked to the ship last, with the dragons hovering in the air, and then they'd lift the ship out of the ice and carry it to the sea.

Toothless found Hiccup and nudged him. Hiccup lifted his arm and rubbed Toothless' head and neck.

"Hey, bud. Ready?"

Toothless purred and looked up at him, one eye narrowed.

"Yeah, I think I'm ready, too. We can do this," Hiccup said softly. Toothless growled in agreement, and barked at the other dragons. In a wave of sound across the square, they growled and called out in return. They were ready.

39. Chapter 39: Connecting Together

Connecting Together

Hiccup was about to go look for his father when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to find Astrid and Gothi behind him.

"Good morning," he said, bowing to Gothi. He turned to Astrid and was about to smile at her when he noticed her face. Astrid was pale. She was in shadows, her hood pulled over her head, and there were dark purple smudges below her eyes. She looked like she hadn't slept in days. Hiccup felt a pain deep in his chest.

But when she looked at him and gave a very small smile, his concern eased a bit. Her eyes were clear, and she didn't look away. He smiled at her, moved closer, and took her hand in his.

He was about to speak when she squeezed his fingers and pulled her hand from his. Too late, Hiccup remembered that Gothi was right there.

Gothi narrowed her eyes at them both and nudged him with her staff. He had no idea what that meant, so he stepped back from Astrid.

"Gothi would like to fly with you," Astrid said to him.

That was... not what he expected.

"With me?" Hiccup looked from Astrid to Gothi, shocked. Gothi nodded firmly, and handed Astrid her staff. Astrid had obviously been enjoying Hiccup's reaction, but when Gothi's staff was pressed into her hand, she looked as unsettled as he felt. At least he wasn't alone.

Gothi reached her hands out toward Hiccup.

"Ready for a harness?"

She nodded. Hiccup turned and picked up one of the smaller harnesses from the pile he and Gobber had made. He held it up over Gothi's head.

"This goes over your - wait," he said, stepping back again. This was absolutely not an appropriate thing for him to be doing.

Astrid rescued him. "Let me help you with that. This part goes over your head, and I'll move the straps over your arms. Take your staff, and I'll tell you when to switch hands," Astrid said, kneeling at Gothi's side and helping her into the harness.

"I'll get a bench for you to climb onto Toothless." When he returned, Gothi was holding her staff and wearing a flying harness while Astrid adjusted the straps behind her.

He called Toothless, who ambled over to sniff Gothi's outstretched hand. She had never flown on a dragon that he knew of, but she was familiar to all of them. Toothless sniffed, then breathed on her

hand, purred and sat down next to her so she could scratch his chin. He curled his body behind her and allowed Gothi to pat his sides, explore the saddle with her hands and inspect his tail. Astrid moved to stand next to Hiccup and watched them.

"You should have seen your face, Hiccup."

He didn't have an answer, but he lightly ran the back of his fingers over her hand while he watched Toothless charm Gothi by blowing her long braids away from her body, one then the other.

Astrid's fingers slipped into his, and she took his hand, her grasp tight, not letting go. He looked over at her.

"It's going to be ok, right?" Astrid asked him, looking up. Her eyes were still clear, but the visible signs of how tired and sad she was hurt him. "Promise me it won't go wrong?"

"It won't," he replied, squeezing her hand in his. "We'll make sure of it. All of us."

...

Soon the rest of the village had arrived, and most of the dragons stepped back, flying up to the rooftops and onto various perches to make room for all the vikings. Stormfly stood behind Astrid. Astrid had taken hold of her wing, and Stormfly wouldn't leave her. Toothless stood next to Gothi, because Gothi had pointed at the ground and told him to, and he, like everyone, listened to her.

Stoick and Gothi moved to the center of the plaza, and a silence fell over the group.

Mornen's ship was waiting by the docks, and there had been a team of men assigned to break the ice around it and keep the water visible near the hull. It was the only ship moving in the harbor, and beneath the collection of sounds that signaled morning in Berk, the creak of the wood underscored the reason they were there.

Stoick began the ritual, and every voice joined his, singing blessings over Mornen's journey, asking the gods to welcome her into Valhalla, to take her rightful place with all the elders of Berk. Every now and then, a dragon would purr or growl, adding to the song.

Stoick spoke of his earliest memories of Mornen, how she'd scared him and told him that he'd be a chief they'd remember, if he stopped falling down so much. Hiccup, who had never heard this story, laughed quietly, but felt the sting of memory, hearing Mornen's voice telling him he would be a great chief one day as well.

Stoick spoke of how Mornen had cared for the village, how her plants and remedies had saved so many over the years. She would be remembered, he added, as an elder to all of them, as a gift to their tribe from the gods, and as a mother to all the Hooligans, from now and for every generation after their time was complete.

Then Stoick turned to Hiccup.

Hiccup stepped forward, and climbed onto Toothless' back so everyone could hear him. He wasn't as tall as his father, and probably wouldn't ever be, but he'd grown enough that he didn't feel as lost among the huge vikings of Berk.

Snotlout, Fishlegs, Tuffnut, Ruffnut, and Astrid stepped forward when he nodded. He'd asked them to stand with him, though Ruffnut had flat out refused to stand on Toothless' back. Fishlegs agreed, saying that Meatlug would be very hurt. So they stood alongside Toothless's tail, slightly behind Hiccup, facing the tribe, the original riders of Berk.

"We brought the dragons to Berk," Hiccup began. "And our tribe is stronger for it. And we have needed the strength of our friends, all of our friends, this week. We watch over one another, like Mornen watched over us."

There was quiet murmuring in response, and low growling as some petted the dragons they loved, knowing that Hiccup was right, that they'd needed one another. The dragons had helped with the hardest labor, flying supplies tirelessly through the cold, and playing with children so the adults could prepare, filling the sad silence with roars and happy laughter when it was needed most.

"Now, we, vikings and dragons together, will escort Mornen to the sea, to say goodbye to her in this life and send her on to the next."
"

Hiccup heard someone sniff and figured it was Fishlegs, so he hurried. He quickly explained again how the lifting would work, and then paused. The village continued to look at him when he'd finished, but he didn't feel the need to look down at the ground away from the weight of their expectations. He met their eyes, as many as he could see. Then he spoke.

"We will work together, beginning and ending the journey together. This is what Mornen wanted."

"Aye," they all replied, their answer echoing down to the water and out over the ice toward the horizon.

Hiccup turned to the others. Fishlegs had covered his face, and Tuffnut leaned on Ruffnut, their arms around each other. Snotlout's face was deep red, and Hiccup saw with surprise that his eyes were, too.

Astrid's were not. She looked at him, a small smile on her face, one infused with so much pride, he had to look down at the ground a moment. Then he looked up at her quickly, and gave a small half smile in return.

"Let's fly," he said.

40. Chapter 40: Letting Go From Above

****Letting Go From Above****

Hiccup and the other riders, along with Stoick, Gobber, and the tallest of the vikings, affixed the chains to each harness as the

dragons and their riders hovered over the square. Then each dragon slowly flew toward the docks and took their position around Mornen's ship. They flew low so the chains dragged on the ground. It made a horrible noise over the stones in the plaza, but Stoick and Hiccup were afraid that if the chains swung or became tangled, a dragon or a viking could be very badly hurt.

Hiccup stood and attached the last of the chains to the other dragons, then helped Gothi onto Toothless' back. She bounced a bit on the saddle, and Toothless looked up at her and grinned.

"Gothi, can you use your staff to slide that metal part forward? Yes, perfect. Toothless?"

His tail extended on both sides, Toothless stretched his wings and lifted off the ground so Hiccup could attach his chain to his harness.

Gothi reached down with her staff and tapped Hiccup's shoulder.

"Don't worry, he's not leaving without me," Hiccup said. Toothless landed again, and Hiccup pulled himself onto the saddle in front of Gothi.

"Can you attach your harness to mine, and to the saddle as well?"

He heard the sound of the hooks snapping into place, then felt a tug on his harness.

"Ready?"

She tugged twice, and he leaned forward over Toothless.

"Let's go, Bud. Low and easy, like we talked about." Toothless growled back at him, lifted off the ground again, then made his way slowly down to the docks.

When they arrived, most of the chains had been attached to rings that had been bolted around the hull of the ship. Astrid's mother had asked if she could attach the chains herself, so she and her sisters slowly moved across the deck to secure each one. Toothless' was last, and it was affixed to the stern so that Hiccup could see each dragon's progress and call out instructions if anyone faltered.

Hiccup watched as Astrid's mother and aunts climbed onto the backs of dragons that were waiting on the docks. He was surprised no one was flying with Astrid, but they wanted to ride apart from the ship, and were wary about being attached to it. Astrid had insisted she be part of the crew lifting Mornen's ship from the ice, so the dragons and riders carrying her family flew into position alongside Stormfly.

They waited until all of Mornen's family were airborne on their dragons, and Hiccup looked at each chain, and each dragon and rider, slowly inspecting their positions around the ship, making sure nothing seemed out of place.

Astrid and Stormfly were to his right, just ahead of him, and when he

examined Stormfly's chain from the deck up to Stormfly's harness, he saw Astrid looking over her shoulder at him. Her axe was behind her, along with her bow, and she looked as if she was ready for battle. He understood how she felt.

"Ready?"

She nodded. It was time.

"All dragon riders, on my count. 1 - 2 - 3 - up!"

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The hull lifted easily from the ice, but it took a minute for each dragon to adjust to the weight they carried.

"Fishlegs, we need two Gronckles below you on the port side," Hiccup called.

"On it!" Fishlegs summoned two more Gronckles and, using a wooden rod with a slight hook at one end, attached their harnesses to the chain below Meatlug so they shared the weight between them.

"Ruff, Tuff, you need to fly away from the ship just a bit. Your chain is longer than the others and I don't want Barf or Belch to get hurt if the chain pulls tight too suddenly."

They waved and moved carefully until the chain below them was taut.

"That's good! That's good!"

He inspected each dragon's position again as the hull hovered over the dock. Ice fell off the sides, lightening the ship slightly, but Hiccup asked Fishlegs to summon more Gronckles and some Monstrous Nightmares to take on more of the load.

"Fishlegs, make sure each dragon is listening to you, because you're flying five now, not just one. Snotlout, you too - can you cover the Monstrous Nightmares on your side?"

"Don't worry - we've got this," Snotlout called back as Fishlegs waved at him.

Hiccup called softly over to Stormfly. "What do you think, Stormfly? Astrid? Are we ready?"

Astrid was looking at each rider, checking them the same way Hiccup had. Stormfly was cocking her head left and right, inspecting each chain as well.

Astrid turned toward Hiccup and nodded firmly.

"It's time," he said over his shoulder to Gothi. "Ready?"

He felt the answering double tug on his harness.

"All riders, all sides. Up!"

They lifted the the ship higher into the air, and at Hiccup's signal,

began moving forward. The chains held fast to the ship, and the dragons didn't seem to be struggling, so after a few moments, he told everyone to go a bit faster, and began the sequence to turn them toward the south, where the open water awaited Mornen.

It took almost two hours, and the sun was slightly above them when they first spotted the blue slices of the sea in the ice ahead of them.

"Water below!" Stoick led the call from his position off the bow, which echoed back to Hiccup. Hiccup gave the signal to slow down gradually, and when they were over the water, he signaled them to stop.

"We're going to do this nice and slow. Fishlegs and Snotlout, you're our balance, so try to stay as steady as possible."

"Got it!"

"All riders behind Fishlegs and Snotlout, keep your dragons level with theirs. We want to lower the ship as slowly as possible, keeping the deck level. Got that?"

They signaled and waved, and Hiccup focused where his father flew on Thornado.

"Hey, dad!"

"Aye!"

"Lower slowly, about one wingspan at a time. Forward riders, keep your eyes on him. Got that?"

Hiccup looked around the sea below them for any pieces of ice that might cause a problem. It was all clear.

"On my signal, and we do this in silence so everyone can hear me. Ready?"

The riders raised their right arms.

"Begin! Lower slowly. Snotlout, too fast, ease up a bit. That's good, that's good."

Hiccup watched as the water rose to meet them. The dragons flapped their wings harder, straining against the task of lowering something while trying to keep it aloft. Bit by bit, they carefully lowered the ship.

The first splash against the hull caused the ship to pitch back towards the stern, but Hiccup saw it in time, calling to Toothless, Astrid and the two riders on his left to lift their side of the ship in the water. He didn't want anything to fall down. So far, nothing huge had been dislodged as far as he could tell, though he thought he heard something roll below the deck.

Slowly, the chains went slack beneath each dragon as the water took the weight of the ship from them. When Hiccup was certain the dragons could disconnect safely, he called out to the riders one at a time to release the harnesses attached to the chains.

The harnesses and chains fell into the water and onto the deck, and the dragons flew off behind the ship as soon as they were free. Astrid was the last to disconnect, and she looked over at him as she and Stormfly flew to their position.

"Gothi, is it alright if I drop the harness?"

Silence. He turned to look at her, and saw that Gothi was looking down at the cloth that covered her sister. Toothless held his position still in the air until Gothi nodded, and tapped Toothless' side. Hiccup released the harness, and the chain fell into the sea below them with a splash.

Toothless shook himself briefly, flexing his wings and legs now that he was free of the weight of the ship.

"Now?" Hiccup asked Gothi softly.

She nodded.

"Ok, bud. Fire."

Toothless aimed at the mast and fired twice in succession, destroying the ropes that held the sail folded across the yardarms. The cloth fell toward the deck. A beam of wood tied to the bottom and fastened on a rail slid ahead of it and locked into place at the bottom of the mast. Instantly, the wind filled the sail and the ship began to move forward away from them.

Hiccup circled carefully above the ship, then flew higher and faced the dragon riders hovering in formation, above them but within sight.

"Whenever you're ready," he told Gothi.

He felt her place her hands on his shoulders and stand up behind him. He held still in case she needed to balance on him, signaling Toothless with a quiet word to stay level in the air.

He saw Gothi's shadow over Toothless' wing, and when she raised her staff, the riders in formation in front of him reached forward so their dragons could ignite their arrows.

Astrid stood up on her saddle, and when Gothi lowered her staff at the ship, she fired, her arrow striking the cloth and setting it ablaze. Hiccup saw her face crumple as she lowered her bow.

The rest of the riders stood in their stirrups and fired at the ship until the deck was ablaze. The wind continued to carry the ship away from them, toward the horizon.

"Hiccup, we're going to escort the ship and make sure she's safe," Snotlout called, Fishlegs right behind him.

Gothi, still standing behind Hiccup, nodded at them, and they waved before they circled down to fly alongside Mornen's ship. Fishlegs returned to the port side, and Snotlout flew across from him. They didn't speak, not that Hiccup could tell, but their backs were straight and proud, and both reached up to wipe their faces without

any shame or hesitation.

Hiccup was certain he knew who the other drawing had been for. He looked over at Astrid. She was watching him with that same tiny smile of pride on her face. He didn't look down.

41. Chapter 41: Fly Higher, Safe and Fast

****Fly Higher, Safe and Fast****

The rest of the riders hovered with Hiccup in formation as Mornen's ship sailed toward the horizon, until the sun slid noticeably lower in the sky. Not everyone had experience riding at night, so, after a tug on the harness from Gothi and a nod from his father, Hiccup gave instructions to turn the group around. Then, they headed home. Stoick, Gobber, the twins, Hiccup and Astrid brought up the rear, making sure no one needed help and that they all made it back to Berk safely.

"It's quite a sight," Stoick said. "Seeing the entire village on the backs of dragons."

"Aye, that it is," Gobber agreed. "You all right over there, Gothi?"

She nodded, making Gobber laugh. "Well, if you're going to fly, you've picked one of the best dragon riders." Hiccup ducked his head.

"And the best dragon," Astrid added with a grin. "One of them, anyway." She reached down and rubbed Stormfly's neck.

The journey back was quiet, though some riders called out to one another, making sure their passengers were safe. For those who had never flown before, it was a challenging day, with the cold wind, their understandable fear and the already heavy emotional burden they each carried. But the sky remained clear, and the sun seemed to slow its descent for them so they could each reach home safely while it was still light.

When the rocks and cliffs became familiar, and they knew they were close to home, Stoick and Gobber flew ahead to flank the group on either side, calling out instructions for each rider so they'd know how to land safely and make room for the next dragon. Astrid stayed alongside Hiccup, not really paying attention to anything.

She watched the sunset, the last gleam of the sun warming her face a tiny amount. She hadn't looked behind her even once on the flight back, though she'd been tempted. It had been hard enough firing the first arrow, and harder still watching the ship burn as it sailed away. She couldn't have done what Fishlegs and Snotlout had, either. She didn't know how she'd thank them when they returned, but she was painfully aware of how great an honor they had paid Mornen.

It hurt to think. Mornen was her mother's aunt. Gothi, too. Astrid's grandmother, their middle sister, had died shortly after Astrid's mother had been born, and as a result, she and then Astrid had grown up surrounded by the fiercest of women. Her mother was a warrior, as were her aunts. Gothi and Mornen, though they didn't wield any

weapons, were frighteningly intelligent even before they became elders, and some said they each had the sight. Even though they could both be intimidating, Astrid had learned early she didn't need to fear them.

Astrid could still remember the nights when her mother and aunts were out fighting the dragons during yet another raid, and she was home, scared and clutching her axe, wishing she should fight, too. Each time, Gothi or Mornen had been with her. They watched over her and sometimes carried her to their homes for a few days, keeping her far away from the fighting. She would still hear raids and battles below them, no matter which house she'd been in, but it had been far enough that when Gothi began weaving or Mornen began singing, the sound disappeared behind the comforting noises of the women who loved her.

Astrid didn't want to forget the feel of Mornen's hand on her hair, braiding it and telling her what a brave and proud warrior she was destined to become, but it hurt to think about it now that Mornen was gone.

Mornen had given Astrid her first axe. She remembered Gothi had glared at her sister for hours afterward. Astrid had thought it was because Gothi considered it an inappropriate gift. Astrid had loved that axe, and still had it. But the next year, Gothi gave her an even bigger one, and Astrid began to understand the rivalry that rose and fell like the sea between them.

They loved her, both of them. And Astrid felt the tears begin again when she thought about how much she'd miss Mornen's hand on her hair, the murmured blessing she gave Astrid, and only Astrid, each time she visited the house high on the hill by the forest.

Astrid was wiping her eyes when a movement caught her attention. Gothi was gesturing to her.

"Hiccup," Astrid called. Her voice was thick and uneven, and she knew Hiccup heard it, the way his head snapped up and he looked at her in concern. "She wants you to go faster."

"What?"

"Gothi. She wants you to fly faster."

"Seriously?" Gothi poked Hiccup in the back, hard enough that he flinched. Astrid smothered a laugh behind her hand.

"Ok, then. Toothless, speed up, stay level."

Astrid watched as Gothi's smile widened as the wind blew back her braids and she flew closer to the clouds. Toothless flew north, away from Berk over the water, and Astrid followed them.

"Gothi, how about this. If you want to go faster, tug twice. One hard tug and keep it taut, and I'll bring us down," Hiccup was saying as Astrid and Stormfly caught up to them.

Gothi nodded. "She's in, Hiccup," Astrid called over to him. "Let's go."

"One more thing. Gothi, if you want to climb higher, you canâ€¦ tap my head, I guess - but not too hard, please," he added.

Gothi's eyes were wide, but not with fear. She reached up and removed her helmet, securing it to one of the harness hooks in front of her. Then she tugged on the harness several times and tapped Hiccup on the head.

"Yes, ma'am. Toothless, our orders have been received. High and fast. You good with that?" Toothless roared and stretched out his wings. Stormfly echoed him, and Astrid lowered her body over Stormfly's back, her smile as wide as Gothi's.

Then, they shot to the sky.

They flew straight up, and once they'd leveled off high above the sea, Gothi looked around at the world below her, never having seen it from such a height.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Hiccup spoke to Gothi over his shoulder, though because of the harness they wore, he couldn't turn his head enough to see her. Gothi was much shorter than he was.

Astrid answered for her. "Yes, it is."

They circled over the sea, soaring up then diving down toward the ice, which locked the waves below them in sculpted stillness. Then they turned back toward Berk from the western side of the island, flying over the cliffs. Gothi leaned over and watched the ice against the rocks, then tapped Hiccup on the head again.

"Higher again? Ok - I have an idea. Hang on."

Hiccup signaled to Astrid, who knew what he was thinking before he spoke.

"I agree," she said as he opened his mouth. "Let's go."

He smiled at her, and together, they flew.

42. Chapter 42: Around, Above, and Below

****Around, Above, and Below****

At that time every winter evening, clouds would gather over the mountains, and slide down to cover the forest. Hiccup and Astrid flew towards them, then raced up through the clouds, surrounded by grey with flashes of gold and pink as the sun tried to reach them.

Then they rose through the clouds, and leveled off above. The mountains stood to their right, and below them was a rippling landscape of grey and silver. The lights of Berk were barely visible in the distance, and the air was still and silent.

Astrid watched Gothi looked around behind Hiccup, who was holding tight to Toothless. He'd added an extra harness, and she was connected to him, but Astrid could tell Hiccup was aware and cautious of Gothi. If he dropped the Berk elder off a dragon, it wouldâ€¦ it would be very bad.

Gothi tugged once on the harness and held it, and Hiccup responded. "Down?"

Gothi tapped his head. "Wait, up?"

She tugged once again, holding the harness tight in her hand. "I'm confused."

Astrid wasn't sure what Gothi wanted, either. But before she tapped Hiccup on the head again with her staff, Hiccup sat up straight. "Gothi, do you want to dive into the clouds and up again?"

Gothi tugged repeatedly on the harness until it began to tickle Hiccup, and he started laughing. "Ok, ok - got it."

Astrid pushed back her hood. "Down and then up, by the hot springs?"

"That'll work."

Their dragons folded their wings and dove toward the hot springs, then coasted over the tops of the trees. When they flew higher toward the clouds, Gothi tugged once and Hiccup understood without Astrid translating. They leveled off below the sliding clouds.

Gothi raised her hands to touch them, her eyes open, her face alight with joy. Astrid knew the feeling. They circled the mountain, flew over the hot springs again, and Gothi rippled the base of the clouds with her hands, and with her staff.

Seeing Gothi so joyful as they flew home brought her sadness to the surface. Stormfly opened her wings and glided through the air to keep Astrid safe from any sudden currents, knowing Astrid wasn't paying attention to her flight. Astrid pulled her hood across her mouth and cried, watching Hiccup bring Gothi under and through the clouds again and again. It didn't hurt to let some of the sadness go.

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Hiccup brought Toothless up high one last time, and as they flew in aimless circles, the moon rose in front of them.

"I think the moon wants us home, Gothi. What do you think?" He felt the answering tug on his harness.

He waited for Astrid to catch up, and they began to slowly coast down towards Berk.

"How'd you know she wanted to fly through the clouds again?" Astrid's face was red and he knew she'd been crying, but she also looked a little more relaxed, the lines between her eyes less strained and tense.

"She's related to you," he replied with a shrug. They were flying slowly, gliding on the evening winds blowing over Berk, so he felt safe to disconnect his harness a moment turn around to look at Gothi. "Right?"

Gothi met his eyes and nodded once, a very familiar wicked grin on

her face.

When they landed a few minutes later, most of the village was in the great hall, judging by the noise and the number of lit torches on that side of the island. The rest of the village was quiet, and, unlike the previous week, the torches were out, so it was dark.

Stoick was waiting for them. Astrid jumped up and slid down Stormfly's wing, just for fun, and reached up to help Stoick give Gothi some assistance as she disconnected her harness and slid off Toothless' saddle.

Hiccup disconnected his leg from the tail fin and removed the extra harness points while Astrid helped Gothi out of her harness, and handed it to Stoick. After Hiccup climbed down, he reached up and set Toothless' tail to a gliding position.

"Thanks, bud. Ready for dinner?"

"You both must be really hungry," Astrid said to the dragons.

Gothi stepped forward alongside her great-niece, and raised her hand up toward Toothless. He lowered his head, his eyes wide and happy, and she rubbed his nose gently. He purred at her, tapping her hand with his nose.

"I think any time you want to fly, Toothless would be happy to take you," Hiccup said.

Gothi didn't respond. Instead, she rubbed a finger on Toothless' nose in a pattern, but not one Hiccup could identify. He glanced at Astrid, who shrugged her shoulders, shaking her head. Toothless didn't draw back, but his eyes were crossing as he tried to figure out what Gothi was doing. She put her hand flat over his nose again, and tapped her hand with her staff. Toothless gave a short bark and smiled at her.

"Go on to dinner, Toothless," Hiccup said. "Eat up."

Toothless and Stormfly barked and squawked at one another as they jumped into the air and glided down to the academy for an enormous fish dinner. They could hear the sounds of the dragons feasting from the square.

"So, Gothi. You finally flew on a dragon," Stoick said.

Gothi peered up at him, then sketched lines in the dirt by her feet. Stoick frowned, turning his head to read, but Astrid could see from where she stood.

"Yes," Astrid said quietly. "You're right. So did Mornen."

They walked together into the feast in the great hall. The vikings were a wall of sound, the entire tribe gathered in large groups around the fire, eating and drinking. People were toasting Mornen, the dragons, the fish, and all their ancestors. It wasn't a particularly joyful event, but everyone was hungry, there was plenty of mead, and they were all very proud of one another. They had done what Mornen wished.

Hiccup watched as Astrid found her mother and the rest of her family, took a plate of food and sat with them. But she ate very little, and a few moments later, when she pushed her cup and plate away and left the great hall, Hiccup followed her.

43. Chapter 43: Releasing the Storm

****Releasing the Storm****

Astrid knew Hiccup was behind her. He was rarely able to be silent when he walked, and especially not when it was cold. But she didn't mind. And after a few steps, she stopped paying attention to anything outside of her own mind.

Her mom and her aunts were still in the great hall, eating and talking, happier together, or so it seemed to Astrid. But the longer she'd sat there, even the comfort of having her mother next to her couldn't soothe the crashing pain inside her.

When she'd slid to the ground on Stormfly's wing, as she walked to the great hall, she'd realized it was over.

She'd never see Mornen again.

The thrill and pride of completing the task of flying her ship to the sea was done, and now that her flight was over, Astrid felt as if she'd landed in a storm of sadness and anger. She'd go back to her regular life now, all the things she did before, and it seemed so wrong. She was furious about how wrong it felt, and she didn't know how to get rid of the fury. She wanted to find Stormfly and take off, fly all night if it meant she didn't have to land again, land and feel so miserable. But she couldn't do that. Stormfly had flown far too much already, and to take her back out would be selfish, and dangerous besides.

Sitting in the great hall didn't help. The noise of all the vikings competed with the churning inside her, and she had to get away.

So Astrid kept walking, through the village, past her home, past the path to the academy and toward the cliffs above the harbor. She didn't hear anyone behind her anymore, but she kept going.

The cliffs weren't safe in winter. The grass that was so welcoming in the summer sloped down to the rocks far below, and in the cold, if the ground was icy, there wasn't much of anything to grab onto to stop a fall.

Astrid didn't care. She sat down on the frozen ground, not caring about the cold, not feeling anything outside herself.

Then Hiccup sat down on her left, close by but not touching her. She didn't look up, but had to glance at him when he shifted onto his side and engaged the spike on his leg. Then he drove it into the frozen ground away from her, anchoring himself.

Astrid looked back out over the sea.

She noticed after a few minutes that the wind stopped trying to cut

her skin and looked down at herself. Hiccup had put a blanket over her shoulders.

"Where did you get a blanket?" Her voice was quiet, so flat she didn't recognize it. She didn't sound like herself.

"I brought some to the plaza this morning."

Astrid nodded.

They sat in silence near the edge of the high cliff overlooking the docks, the night sky lit by the moon. It carved shadows in different places, and lit with silver the hole in the ice left behind by Mornen's ship. Astrid looked down at it, her arms around her knees. She had her hood up against the cold, and Hiccup had wrapped the blanket over them both, but now that she was aware of it, the cold was relentless. It felt like knives where it touched her skin, but she didn't want to go inside yet. It burned but she felt alive when it did.

"Loading the ship was so difficult," she said softly. Hiccup shifted beside her, and she felt his arm reach across her back to bring her closer. She didn't realize she'd been waiting for him to do so until she leaned into the warmth of his embrace and felt some of the brittle tension that held her upright all day leave her with each breath.

"We didn't have to carry her body, but we put all the things she'd need around her. I wasâ€¦."

Astrid's thoughts slid away from her as she watched the tiny patch of water in the harbor break the moonlight into ripples and curls. Hiccup didn't speak. He gave her the quiet space she needed. Eventually Astrid remembered what she'd been about to say.

"I was scared, Hiccup," she whispered.

"Scared of what?"

"I don't know," she replied, shifting her legs in irritation. Hiccup moved the blanket so that it fell over her legs, too.

"I'm so bothered by that, that I was scared and couldn't do anything about it. I was scared to look at her body, even though I'd seen it. I was scared to go onto the ship, even though it was my responsibility. I was scared to leave my mother on the ship, and I waited for her every time we climbed on, or off. Iâ€¦ it wasâ€¦."

"Completely normal?"

She elbowed him, but not hard enough to hurt.

"I know. But I didn't like it."

"I don't think anyone likes that part."

She nodded, and felt the rise and fall of his breath beside her. His arm rested across her back, his fingers covering the skin of her upper arm, keeping her warm. She felt safe.

"I loved what you made," she said.

"Thanks."

Astrid sniffed and wiped her nose on her gauntlet until Hiccup handed her a small cloth. She twisted it in her fingers as she spoke.

"I wouldn't let anyone else put the things you made on the ship. I had to do it. I don't know why," she said in a rough, quiet voice. "I took forever, too, because I would only carry one thing at a time, but how else was I supposed to look at all of it properly?"

She shifted closer to him, and put her head on his shoulder before she continued.

"The staff that Gobber made, did you see it when it was finished?"

She felt Hiccup nod, and his arm tightened around her briefly.

"Odin's ghost, Hiccup. It wasâ€¦ it was so beautiful. And the water basin you made. I walked so slowly so I could look at all of it it."

The designs had come to life under her fingers as she walked onto the ship, then down to the area where they were placing Mornen's gifts. The shadows moving over the carvings had made the waves look as if they were alive, captured inside the metal. And the plants carved into the rim, she'd had to touch each one, each tiny metal leaf, before she could put it down and leave it behind. The things that Hiccup and Gobber had made, it hurt less inside when she was carrying them, as if they were there with her, helping her.

"There was so much, too. Baskets and trays and everything. But the things you and Gobber madeâ€¦ thank you. I don't know if anyone in my family said anything to you, but we were all talking about them."

She pushed back her hood and looked up at his face, which, as she expected, was pointed down at the ground. She reached up and turned his head so he was looking at her instead.

"I didn't want to leave them behind," she confessed in a whisper. "I know they were Mornen's, and that you'd made them, that they were for her, but youâ€¦ they were beautiful."

"Thank you."

"No. Thank you."

"You're welcome," he replied.

She closed the minute distance between them, and their kiss was slow, and gentle, and endless. It warmed her, and when she relaxed against him, the last of the knots loosened in her throat. She pulled back, trying to keep the sadness inside, away from Hiccup.

He looked in her eyes, and the kindness that he always wore broke

something inside her, and she couldn't hold it back. She put her head down on his shoulder, and began to cry. His arm tightened around her, and she cried more. With his other hand, he reached up and covered her head with the blanket, hiding her and keeping her warm, and she sobbed in deep, painful gasps.

She reached across his body and held on, and he shifted her toward him. Then he lifted her slightly and moved her even closer to him so that she was curled into the shelter of his body, beneath the blanket. Behind the waves of pain that she couldn't swallow back any longer, she felt his arms around her, holding her to him. Her head rested on his shoulder, and the steady rise and fall of his chest became her anchor against the storm inside.

He kissed her hair, and didn't tell her to stop, or to be quiet. He let her hold onto him until she ran out of tears, and the painful tide in her chest had ebbed enough that her breath didn't catch in her throat. Hiccup held her, and kept the blanket around them both, until it was time for them each to go home.

44. Chapter 44: New Patterns Among Friends

****New Patterns Among Friends****

In the days after the funeral, the people of Berk picked up the threads of their former routines. Some were exactly as they left them, while others found that their lives followed a new pattern, altered by the changes left behind.

For Astrid, everything was new. Every part of her world looked pale and unfamiliar. Once, as a girl, she'd closed her eyes and turned her face to the sun while sitting on the beach. When she'd opened her eyes minutes later, everything had looked washed out, flat and grey. Berk looked that way to her now.

The only spots of vividness were Stormfly, and the academy, where she and the other riders were preparing for the spring thaw, and training the youngest groups in long distance flight. There would be a few overnight journeys coming up for them, but Astrid wouldn't be going.

For the dragon riders, there were many differences. Ruff and Tuff were training a younger set of twins on a Zippleback, which required a lot of open space and the absence of anything flammable. They were out most of the day instead of hanging around the academy.

For the others, the days were became longer. After flight training each afternoon, Astrid, Hiccup and Fishlegs began walking together up to Mornen's house to check the garden and make sure the plants were safe. At first, Astrid had intended to make the walk by herself, but then she decided to ask Hiccup to come with her. When Fishlegs overheard her, and mentioned he'd planned to go, they made a habit of it.

The long walk give them time to talk about the dragons, their flight training, and the other tasks that filled their days, and Astrid began to look forward to it. It had been painful, just the idea of going to Mornen's home, knowing she wouldn't be there, wouldn't greet her with a hand on her hair and her familiar, slightly wicked smile.

But with Hiccup and Fishlegs, it hurt less to see the house still and silent each time they made the climb.

The time together also allowed Astrid to realize how similar Hiccup and Fishlegs were. She knew they had a good amount in common, and they were easily the most knowledgeable about dragons, but she didn't realize how similar they were until she listened to them. Fishlegs delighted in knowledge, in how the things he learned fit the things he knew. Hiccup did as well, and he also found tremendous joy in figuring out what he could do with that knowledge. Astrid rarely spoke on their walks up the hill, because the two of them were too much fun to listen to, and she didn't want to interrupt. Fishlegs would report what he'd noticed about a dragon's fire power, or flight technique, and Hiccup would immediately wonder aloud how they could best use that knowledge to help the dragons, and the vikings. If Hiccup built every weapon he'd described on their hikes, their arsenal would be impossible to beat.

The three of them also debated ways to shelter the garden, and care for it without having to visit each day. Astrid knew that as the days grew longer and the sun stayed in the sky, their time to tend Mornen's garden would actually decrease. Fishlegs was convinced that there was a way to keep the plants watered for 2 or 3 days without having to visit them personally, but he and Hiccup hadn't figured out the best method yet.

One afternoon, after Hiccup had proposed a system to water the plants using the melting snow, they'd debated the options the entire hike up the mountain. They didn't hear that someone was already there until they walked behind the house and found Snotlout, shirt off, covered in dirt and grime, pushing a heavy table to the far side of the garden.

They stopped when they saw him, all three of them shocked.

Snotlout didn't notice them at first, but when he did, his face and neck turned a very angry red, and he moved in front of the table, prepared to fight.

"I wasâ€¦I was sent up here to move the table," Snotlout said - as usual a terrible liar.

None of them spoke, which only made Snotlout more angry.

"What? What do you want?"

"Any ideas?" Astrid mumbled to Hiccup. Hiccup shrugged faintly.

"He's your cousin," she added.

"Never helped me before, won't help me now," Hiccup muttered in reply.

He was saved from having to think of something by Fishlegs, who walked calmly up to Snotlout, and pulled off his shirt.

"Where are we putting this table?"

Snotlout blinked at him, arms still bent and ready to pummel

him.

"Uhh," Snotlout said as he lowered his fist. "The far edge of the garden."

It wasn't a question.

Snotlout spoke with as much authority and understanding as Hiccup did in the dragon academy. Fishlegs moved to one side of the table.

"Let's move it, then."

Hiccup looked at Astrid.

"Let's give them a minute," he said in a low voice.

"You're not going to help them?"

He shook his head, walking over to the back wall of Mornen's house, where the buckets and tools for watering the garden were kept.

"Not taking your shirt off?" Astrid teased him, knowing Snotlout and Fishlegs were making so much noise they wouldn't hear her.

"Ha. You wish."

Astrid moved closer and reached above his head to grab a bucket off a hook.

"Maybe," she replied.

Hiccup turned his head and looked at her, frowning. She smiled at him, then started filling the buckets.

Mornen had a well behind her house. She'd built her house there on purpose, but didn't tell anyone about the well until she asked the builders to dig down to it. The water was deep beneath the mountain, and the vikings who had to dig for it still complained about it years later, but it kept her garden happy and green. Now that the snow had melted, the soil was drying out, and the plants needed a drink.

When Astrid sent the bucket down, though, it took a lot more rope than usual before she heard the splash of the water.

"That's not good," she said, pulling it up and pouring it into the basin Hiccup was holding. He carried it over to the garden and used the sieve Mornen had designed to sprinkle water over the plants.

Does no good to drown them, she'd told Astrid once. We're not bathing them. They like rain, so we act like rain.

After a few trips across the garden, Hiccup's shirt was wet, but he didn't take it off. Snotlout and Fishlegs were working on moving the fabric wall to allow for the warmer air to reach the garden once the thaw was finished. They were making an unnecessary amount of noise doing so, especially Snotlout, and both were now streaked with dirt.

"Still not taking your shirt off?" Astrid knew she had to tease Hiccup quietly or he'd be furious with her, but she couldn't resist.

"No," he replied.

"You're getting all wet."

"No big deal," he said, turning back to the garden. She could see his face was turning pink

When he returned, she said in a quiet voice, barely holding in her laughter at how red he was, "You would have plenty to add to the, uhâ€¦ show here."

He looked at her. "How do you know?"

And then it was Astrid's turn to blush deeply.

"Just a guess."

Hiccup looked at her, his eyes narrowing.

"What have you been up to?" He stood next to her, that half smile on his face.

"No idea what you're talking about," Astrid replied, looking down into the well farther than she needed to as she brought up the bucket.

The suspicion on his face made her pour the water too quickly into the basin he held. Astrid spilled water all over him, and herself.

She could see Hiccup biting his lips to keep from laughing as she put the bucket down and pulled her shirt away from her skin to squeeze the water out.

"You know, you couldâ€¦" he said, barely holding his mouth in a straight line.

"Do not even think it, Hiccup," she growled at him.

He laughed and brought the water to the far side of the garden.

45. Chapter 45: Cracking the Ice

****Cracking the Ice****

The next day, the four of them walked to Mornen's together. Hiccup was quiet, listening to Fishlegs, who was trying to draw Snotlout into conversation about the garden. Snotlout didn't seem to want anyone to know about his involvement and refused to answer Fishlegs' questions. Of course, he was walking with them, and had worked with Fishlegs in the garden for hours already. His denial was ridiculous, but Hiccup knew he couldn't say anything.

"The well is lower than normal," Astrid said to Fishlegs. "You think

this summer will be dry?"

Fishlegs nodded quickly. "Yes, I do. I noticed Meatlug was drinking less this week, and when I poured more water for her, she didn't take any of it until the next day, like she was saving it."

Hiccup looked up ahead of them. "There was less snow on the mountain this winter, which means less water when it melts."

"That's not good, especially for the garden," Astrid said.

"Do you think there's a way we could bring in snow from other parts of the island before it melts, and set up a system to water the garden? We could-" Hiccup said, thinking out loud, when Snotlout interrupted him.

"Yes. There's a flat metal tray on the roof already, in the back where the roof slopes down toward the garden. I need some pieces to go between the tray and the garden, but I haven't found any yet."

The other three stared at him. He glared at them, and refused to say any more.

When they reached the house, Astrid pulled up water from the well and gave the plants a small drink. The soil was still damp, so they didn't need much.

Snotlout was standing by the garden, looking up at the roof and then down at the rows of plants. Fishlegs opened his mouth to say something, but Astrid grabbed his arm, shaking her head at him.

Wait, she mouthed. He nodded.

Then Snotlout spoke.

"The path for the water needs to run to the south side of the garden," he said, as if adding to a conversation in progress - maybe one he was having with himself. "That side is slightly higher, so any water we bring will run down toward the other plants."

Hiccup, who had been leaning against the well watching them, stood up and approached Snotlout. He reached into his vest for his notebook.

"I have a drawing that might work," he said. "Take a look."

Snotlout looked down at the notebook in Hiccup's hands, and his face went rigid with anger. He looked at the sketch of the garden, then at Hiccup, his face and neck flushing deep red.

"What?" Hiccup asked, stepping back, confused by his reaction.

Snotlout opened his mouth, ready to yell, but then closed his jaw with a grunt. He looked at the drawing, then at the garden. His cheeks were still red, but the rage slowly left his expression.

"Gimme your charcoal?"

"Sure," Hiccup replied, handing it over.

Snotlout took the notebook and drew a line outside the garden, and pointed to where they'd moved the table. "That's the first place water should go once it leaves the roof."

Hiccup's eyes narrowed and he looked at the drawing again. "Got it. You're right. What do you need?"

They discussed the parts Snotlout had in mind, and Hiccup sketched them.

"So a curved piece like this that slopes down, then narrower pieces like this?"

"Yes, at least four of them."

"Not a problem. I'll get started tomorrow."

"You can build that?"

"Snotlout. I work in the forge."

"Oh, yeah," he said, his typically smug grin appearing as his anger decreased.

...

The winter thaw continued as the sun stayed with them a little longer each day. They could hear the ice cracking, and the harbor was more water than ice already.

Hiccup and the others worked late each evening trying to construct a watering system and fill it before the snow disappeared. They agreed that they couldn't take snow from the mountain, because that would run down from the mountain to feed their streams and wells. But there was still plenty of ice and snow on other parts of the island.

Fishlegs and Snotlout disagreed whether the larger pieces of ice would work. Snotlout thought one huge mass of ice would be ideal.

"One large chunk, and we're done. Easy," he insisted, as he and Fishlegs maneuvered another piece of metal that angled from the roof down to the garden. Their work was especially dirty, and they were covered in mud and melted slush again.

"No," Fishlegs said, pushing the other end of the pipe. "Bad idea. If it's too heavy, it could crush the house."

"Nah," Snotlout said, shaking his head - though he didn't sound as sure of himself.

"They can argue without hitting each other?" Astrid whispered to Hiccup, who was cutting more of the metal pieces he and Toothless had flown up to their worksite. "When did this happen?"

Hiccup shrugged, then cut another piece. Astrid watched him while she watered some of the newer seedlings and dug up the larger plants to move them from one plot to another.

He still had his shirt on, despite how warm it was. What was he afraid of? She could see the muscles of his arms and back - muscles she'd seen plenty of already, not that she could tell him that - and could barely keep her eyes off him.

She needed something else to focus on, she thought to herself. Anything else.

Fishlegs raised his voice. "Snotlout, I am telling you. If we pick the wrong chunk of ice, we'll crush the house."

"No one is crushing the house," Astrid said. Fishlegs shook his head at her, his palms up.

"Maybe if we pick up smaller pieces of ice, add them one at a time. Ice is best because it'll melt slower," Snotlout said as he pushed another part of the system into place. "If we dump a bunch of snow up there, it'll melt in the sun in a few hours."

"I can build a cover for the tray on the roof," Hiccup said, bringing over another slanted curve of metal. "But that won't help much. It'll get hot either way."

"Yeah," Fishlegs said. "You're right, Snotlout."

"What? What was that?" Snotlout staggered back. "Say that again, I didn't hear you."

Fishlegs flicked some slush at him, hitting him square in the chest.

"That was not wise, my friend, not wise at all," Snotlout said, picking up a wad of damp snow and forming a ball.

Fishlegs squeaked and moved quickly behind the plants. "You wouldn't hurt the garden, Snotlout, and you know it."

Snotlout threw the snowball, but missed Fishlegs' head by a narrow margin. Unfortunately for Snotlout, Fishlegs had better aim when he wielded a large handful of mud. Snotlout yelled in outrage as mud splattered all over him.

Astrid laughed so hard she couldn't stand up, and Hiccup ducked back behind the pile of metal he was working on.

"Do you yield, Snotlout?" Fishlegs had a wide smile on his face, and was holding another handful of mud ready to strike.

"Fine, fine - only for the plants. You're throwing their mud," he sneered.

"Oh, right," Fishlegs muttered, carefully placing the mud back in the garden.

They moved the unfinished pieces to the back of the house as the sky began to darken. Astrid had thought it was the sun moving behind a

cloud, preparing to sink below the horizon, but then fat drops of water started pummeling the ground. Within minutes waves of heavy rain rolled down the mountain towards them.

"Time to go," Astrid said. They hurried, but the rain still drenched them as they ran for the house. Snotlout was ecstatic.

"Bath time!"

"Oh, Gods," the rest of them muttered. Snotlout had his head back and was letting the water crash onto him.

"Snotlout, that's a little dangerous. There may be lightning, you know," Astrid yelled.

"You don't know what you're missing, Astrid," he replied. Then he leered at her. "Care to join me?"

"Ugh, no," Astrid said, recoiling.

Snotlout was undeterred, and jogged over to her, leer still in place. "Are you sure?"

Astrid stepped forward toward him. "Yes," she said, unamused.

"Are you sure you're sure?" Snotlout said in an oily voice as he turned and took a step backwards. He lifted his hand to grab Astrid, but stopped when he bumped into Hiccup. Astrid's eyes widened, and Snotlout spun around to face him.

Hiccup stood very close to him, chin down, arms folded, more angry than Astrid had ever seen him look before. He was clearly furious, but his face was so calm. A deadly-looking, chilling calm.

Snotlout gulped and looked quickly between Astrid and Hiccup.

Astrid held her axe ready. Hiccup didn't move back.

Both were glaring at him.

"Ok, ok, no need to get mad," he said, stepping away, and grabbing his shirt. He backed away from them both and headed for the path.

Fishlegs rolled his eyes. "Snotlout, you are so blind."

Snotlout shrugged, then turned and started walking down the hill.

It was probably safe for them to head home, too. There hadn't been any thunder. It probably stayed away out of fear that Snotlout would continue to undress, Astrid thought.

"You all do not know what you're missing!" Snotlout's voice echoed from the trees as they stood by Mornen's house.

"Don't follow him too quickly," Fishlegs said. "Or we'll all go blind."

Astrid looked over at Hiccup. He was still staring after Snotlout, his expression stony, and a little terrifying. She smiled at him,

tentatively, and shifted closer so she could nudge him gently in the ribs. He looked over at her, and the tension on his face dissolved. Together with Fishlegs, they walked down the hill toward Berk, hurrying, but not by much.

None of them wanted to catch up to Snotlout.

46. Chapter 46: Spinning Away, Flying Back

****Spinning Away, Flying Back****

The rain gave them some extra time to modify and install the water system, but not much. It was warm the following day, and warmer the day after that, so they needed to hurry to keep the plants from dying.

Gobber volunteered to help them, but it would have taken him too long to climb the hill, so Toothless flew Gobber and Hiccup to Mornen's house, and the others rode their dragons out to grab different sized chunks of ice from various spots on the island that hadn't yet melted. Soon the grass on the cliff side of the house was littered with assorted pieces of ice.

Gobber moved them around, kicking them with his metal leg and hacking them with his pick attachment, grouping a few together and putting others aside. He'd helped build Mornen's house, and said he'd be able to tell if something would be too heavy. If he was wrong, and the first sign that something was too big was the roof shifting or the wood groaning, they could still lift the ice off easily with the dragons.

Hiccup had climbed up to the roof and was connecting the metal pieces at the edge when a piece of ice fell apart from above and the slush landed on him, and on the metal tray he was standing on, knocking him sideways.

"Hiccup! I'm sorry," Fishlegs called.

Hiccup brushed himself off. "I'm fine," he yelled up to Fishlegs.

But when he stood back up, he discovered that couldn't keep his balance on the metal tray. It was too slippery beneath his leg. He was still wearing the winter one though, so he rotated the cuff to switch to the spike, pivoted and kicked it down into the wood to give himself traction.

"Hey. That's cool," a voice said above him. Snotlout hovered with Hookfang just over the roof edge, watching Hiccup.

"Thanks," he replied.

"You good?"

Hiccup looked up, surprised. "Yeah, I'm good. I'm not going anywhere now."

Snotlout grinned at him, and flew off for more ice.

If gardens mellowed Snotlout into a halfway decent person, perhaps they should plant more of them all over Berk, starting with the academy.

Or they could permanently attach one to his body, Hiccup thought. Then he smiled. That would be a good look for him. Grass for hair, maybe.

"What are ye grinning at up there?" Gobber yelled from the side yard and the sound bounced off the cliffs behind him.

"Nothing!"

Within an hour, they'd collected enough ice that they would be able to place different groups on the roof during the week, and leave a small pile in place that day to test out the system. Gobber and Snotlout disagreed as to how many and what size pieces they should leave, but in the end, they compromised. Snotlout added one larger chunk of ice in place of two smaller ones that he said would melt too quickly. Gobber didn't argue with him. He had learned too that the garden was one place where Snotlout thought he knew best, and, more surprisingly, whatever he suggested was probably right.

By the time they flew back to Berk, they were tired and very sweaty, covered in dirt, grass, and bits of ice.

"Thank the gods for washday," Astrid said as they landed near the stables. Stormfly wandered off to find food, and Astrid shouldered her axe and turned toward her home.

"No axe throwing first?" Hiccup was still sitting on Toothless.

"Always axe throwing first," she replied. "See you later!"

Hiccup watched her go, then flew off with Toothless toward his house. He needed a ride to the hot springs, or he'd never dry off in time. It still got cold in a hurry at night.

...

Toothless grumbled at him as they flew to the hot springs.

"I know, I know. I'll be quick, I promise."

Then Toothless's ears went up, and he turned his head quickly to the right looking down below them. Hiccup leaned forward to look over Toothless' head.

He saw a flash of silver cross a meadow below them.

"One short detour, bud?"

Toothless huffed but spread his wings and sailed into the wind currents.

Hiccup shouldn't stay in the air too long, not if he didn't want to get caught spying. If their shadow stayed behind her, she wouldn't see them. She definitely wouldn't hear them.

Hiccup leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. They hovered high in the air over the edge of the clearing, and he saw her tumble across the grass, toss her axe in the air, spin around, catch it, and whip it away from her. It landed in the tree with a thunk that reached Hiccup's ears, even high above her.

Astrid was amazing to watch. He'd seen her in battle, and in practice for battle for most of his life, but her strength never failed to stop his breath.

She dove across the field below them, a blur of red and yellow against the grass. The weighted axe had increased her throwing capacity. She was more than halfway across the clearing, and her axe was embedded deeper in the target every time she threw it. She had to use both arms and then the strength of her legs to dislodge it so she could throw it again. He watched as she turned, spun, dove and flew across the grass, each time throwing her axe the rest of the way across the field with equal force.

Suddenly Toothless slapped Hiccup in the head with one of his ears, not gently, either. Hiccup looked around, realizing the sun had moved substantially behind them. How long had they been hanging in mid air?

"Ok, bud, you're right. Sorry. Let's go."

Toothless grunted at him, shaking his head, and turned them toward the hot springs.

Hiccup scratched the back of Toothless' neck as they landed. The shadows were already long across the hot springs, and he definitely needed to hurry.

Typical, he thought to himself as he removed his clothing and sat on his rock to remove his leg. Astrid could so easily distract him, just by being herself. He could be focused on something so intently he wouldn't hear his father and the rest of the vikings walk past him in full battle armor, but if Astrid threw a weapon anywhere in his field of vision, every thought in his head would blow away.

Now that he was alone, every thought that had spun away from him came rushing back at once: weapons, his father, flying plans, the academy, Snotlout, Astrid, how to improve his saddle, Zippleback gas, where they'd take the next group of students, Astrid, the garden, the cove, Toothless' tail finâ€¦

He slid into the springs and ducked his head under the water.

47. Chapter 47: Sketching Every Thought

****Sketching Every Thought****

When Hiccup climbed out of the springs, the air was cooler, and not merely because of the contrast between the evening breeze and the hot water below it. It was going to take longer than usual for him to dry, but Toothless was with him, waiting somewhat patiently on the flat rocks by the spring. He didn't have to walk home.

The rock by the hot spring was the only place other than in the sky

where he could focus on things most easily, probably because he was pinned to it by the fact that he was waiting to leave. He could get up and go back to Berk if he had to, but if he put on his leg while the skin was damp, he'd suffer for it. So he had to sit, and wait, and be patient, which left a lot of quiet, and even more room for thinking.

Sometimes he sketched, and sometimes, when Toothless joined him, they'd sit on the hot stone together. Toothless was not as fond of the springs as Hiccup, though. He had no use for hot baths, and found little to enjoy in trying to drink hot water from a pond that sent bubbles up his nose.

After sitting in the sun most of the day, his rock was warm, and it wasn't horrible to have to sit still and not do anything. Toothless stretched out behind him, and Hiccup leaned back, resting against Toothless' belly. He could feel Toothless' heartbeat behind his back, and the vibrations of his voice whenever the only response to one of Hiccup's comments was a grumble or a groan.

In most parts of his life, there were very few things he was absolutely certain of. Toothless was one. Astrid was another. He knew she had his back at any moment, and he knew he could count on her to be honest, to argue and push, or to help him when he needed it. She was his fiercest combatant when there was disagreement, and his best ally when they worked together.

Astrid was on the periphery of his thoughts most of the time, but he didn't often allow himself the luxury of focusing solely on her.

For one, it could easily become embarrassing.

But one of the benefits, and sometimes disadvantages, of living so much in his own head was that Hiccup was very familiar with his own emotions. And because he liked to break things down into their smallest parts, or re-assemble pieces into new purposes, he could examine his own feelings closely, and figure out what, or who, caused them.

Hiccup was fully aware of how he felt about Astrid. But he didn't have any idea how to talk to her about it. Making things for her, giving her weapons or drawings she would like, that was a language he knew, that he could use to talk to her.

Now that he'd nearly knocked Snotlout's head off his shoulders, he was feeling less sure of himself. He'd revealed a lot. Something everyone could see. And as comfortable as he was with his own feelings, he didn't relish other people knowing how he felt, especially not about Astrid. Not when he didn't know how to talk to her about any of it.

The blue of the sky was tinged with gold, signaling the departure of the sun, and he knew it was almost time to head back. Hiccup pulled a clean shirt over his head and used the one he'd been wearing to dry his leg. Toothless grumbled at him.

"Oh, come on, bud. It's not that bad. We haven't been here that long."

Toothless growled in reply, nudging Hiccup with his head. Hiccup

reached up and scratched Toothless' chin, something that would immediately still him and buy Hiccup a few more minutes to sit. He opened his notebook while Toothless purred and began sketching the things flying through his mind. He drew a slingshot, a dragon saddle with a sideways sword hilt, a mount for an axe or a bow and arrow, and then Astrid's braid from the back. Any image that entered his head, he drew it, trying to get all the chaos out of his mind. The chaos continued for two more pages, until he turned to an empty sheet of paper and stopped.

He rested his pencil on the page and ran his hand through his hair. Still pretty wet. He shook his head back and forth, prompting Toothless to growl at him when droplets hit his skin.

"Sorry," Hiccup said, pushing his hair back off his forehead. It was still too wet to fly with, unless he wanted to have crunchy ice hair when he got home.

He sat back against Toothless and started sketching the teens and their dragons. Well, he sketched their dragons easily enough, but drew each of their helmets instead of their faces. For Fishlegs, he drew a deck of cards, and drew another braid to represent Astrid, adding the curve of her jaw and her shoulders beneath the twist of her hair.

What flight weapon would best suit each rider, he thought to himself as he added a few quills to his sketch of Stormfly, and darkened Hookfang's horns. Often when he was drawing something completely different would an idea come to him, so he started drawing the cliffs behind Hookfang, filling in the side of the page with the crags on the north and east side of the island.

Then Toothless lifted his head sniffing the air, and let out a questioning growl.

"Who's there?" Hiccup echoed Toothless. He closed his notebook, put it down beside him, and spun toward the path, tucking his left leg under him. Toothless didn't seem alarmed, just curious and a little wary. There couldn't be that many people headed to the springs. It was too early for Astrid to be on the path back to Berk, not if she was throwing her axe a little while ago.

Then a bag swung forward and dropped by the large boulder in front of him. A folded skirt of spikes and metal shoulder armor landed on top of it.

48. Chapter 48: Unbound

****Unbound****

"Astrid?"

She came around the boulder quietly, looking around. Her hair was wet and coiled tightly behind her, her face flushed, probably from the heat of the springs. She was wearing leggings and a long green tunic, patched and soft with age, and none of her armor.

Hiccup stared at her, blinking. He had no memories of her without armor. Not even from when they were children. And the image of her

now, right at that moment, was searing itself into his mind.

"Hey," she said, glancing right and left into the small cove. "Anyone else here?"

"Just us," Hiccup said, familiar buoyant joy filling his chest when she walked towards him. He couldn't stop himself from smiling at her, though he knew his eyes were wide.

Toothless didn't stand, but he lowered his head over the edge of the stone toward her, greeting her with a low purr.

"I've never seen any dragons here before," Astrid said, reaching up to rub Toothless' forehead.

"Toothless doesn't like it much. There's no fish here."

Astrid made a face. "Can't blame him for that. And if there were? Hot fish? Ugh."

She turned and went back over to her bag, digging down the side and pulling out a small packet of waxed cloth.

"Here you go, Toothless," she said, tossing a strip of dried fish toward him. Toothless' ears shot up as he snatched the fish out of the air. Then he gulped it down and licked his lips, growling as he thumped his tail once on the stone.

"You're welcome," Astrid said with a smile. Toothless grinned at her, retracting his teeth, and then turned to Hiccup and snorted at him.

"Ugh, ok, Fish Breath. I'll make sure to always pack snacks."

Astrid laughed and came closer to the rock.

"Can I join you?"

"Of course," he said, using his arms to shift himself away from the edge of the stone. Astrid pulled a comb from her pocket and jumped up, landing next to him.

His mind went blank again.

Then she reached up and removed the leather tie at the base of her neck and began to unwind her hair.

He had to remind himself to breathe.

The water had turned her hair a different color, less yellow and more gold, and it fell in a twisted curl down her back. She moved a section of her hair over her shoulder and began pulling the comb through it.

"I had a feeling you and Toothless might still be here, and I didn't want to miss you. Can I finish before we leave?" She gestured with the comb toward her hair, then stopped. "If you can give me a ride back, I mean."

Hiccup looked at her. Like he'd say no.

"Of course you can - fly back with us and finishâ€¦." He gestured toward her comb with his pencil. Astrid's grin was quick, and then she looked over her shoulder, moving another section of her hair forward. She continued pulling the comb through her hair, piece by piece, in short, gentle pulls until she could sweep the comb from the top of her head to the ends of her hair without meeting a snarl.

He watched for a moment. He'd seen her throw axes, knock down people twice her size, put out fires, and backflip off a dragon. But he'd never seen her with her braid unbound, without her armor, combing the knots and tangles from her hair. It was...

He had to look away. Soon. In another minute. He couldn't watch, no matter how much he wanted to. It hurt to breathe, looking at her. It wasâ€¦ too intimate. Too much. Maybe someday he'd be able to, if they -

_Not thinking about that right now. _

He forced himself to look away, picked up his notebook and put it over his legs, opening to the page he'd been working on.

Too late he remembered what he'd just finished drawing.

"What are you - is that my braid?" Astrid looked closer then turned her head toward him, her face close to his.

"Yeah. I'mâ€¦ I'm not too good at drawing faces," Hiccup said, his own burning.

"You drew Mornen," Astrid replied.

"Yeah, that was â€¦ different, somehow. Anyone else I try to draw comes out looking wrong, Or odd. Or both."

"So, what are you working on?" Astrid shifted another section of her hair over her shoulder and moved her comb gently through it, starting from the ends and working her way up towards her face. He looked again, unable to stop himself. Her hair, now loose in a torrent of waves down her back, reached past her elbows to her waist, some of it touching the rock behind her. He had no idea her braid shortened the length so much. Then he realized she was waiting for him to speak.

He looked from her hair to her face. She was looking at him, a gentle, slightly knowing smile lighting her face.

Hiccup shifted his legs and moved his notebook closer to her.

"I wanted to design weapons best suited to each rider."

If Astrid with weapons distracted Hiccup, mentioning weapons worked equally well to distract Astrid. She moved closer to him and looked at the page he held, still pulling the comb through her hair.

"Show me what you've done so far?"

Hiccup sketched as he and Astrid discussed options that would match each rider and each dragon. By the time Astrid finished combing out

her hair and had braided it behind her head, they'd come up with several ideas for each viking and dragon, options that drew on their individual strengths and factored in their personalities.

"The twins shouldn't have anything that explodes, either," Astrid said. Hiccup nodded.

"They might modify it so it explodes anyway," he said.

"That's true," she agreed. He watched her fingers wrap the leather tie around her braid with practiced ease, and glanced back at her face.

Astrid smiled at him, looking more like herself, though the softness that left him breathless remained.

"Ready to go?"

49. Chapter 49: Drawing Together

****Drawing Together****

Hiccup reached down to feel the skin on his left leg. It was still a little damp, enough that he didn't want to put on his prosthesis yet.

"A few more minutes?"

Astrid, who had been watching him, nodded with a slight shrug. "I think there are bonfires tonight. The twins were promising a huge one on the cliffs."

"Yeah, I heard Fishlegs talking about it."

Hiccup froze. Fishlegsâ€¦ _Snotlout_. He looked up at Astrid, but any words he might have used to talk to her about earlier were absent. His mind could sometimes be very unhelpful when he needed ideas the most.

Astrid hadn't noticed his hesitation. She was running the comb over her head, smoothing out her hair. He wanted to ask her, to apologize if she was upset that he'd revealed too much or embarrassed her, but he didn't know what to say. Or do.

So he picked up his notebook again, and added some embellishments to the weapons they'd come up with. They'd designed a set of slingshots for the twins, with various types of ammunition that could be used - including some that were flammable, despite Astrid's misgivings.

For Snotlout, they had to come up with a weapon that would allow him to aim at a large target area, because for all his bravado, his aim was not good. Hiccup suspected it was because his eyesight wasn't always great at seeing far distances, but he didn't mention it. Hookfang often made up for Snotlout's inability to see things that were far away from them both, but if Snotlout was going to use a weapon while flying, he needed something that would spread to hit a wider target area so his aim, or lack thereof, wasn't a problem.

Astrid had suggested a larger slingshot, with ammunition that would splatter on impact, such as hot water, acid, or even lava, if they could figure out a way to enclose it in something that wouldn't burn their hands. Hiccup had made a long line of notes down the side of the page of options for holding lava, water, and possibly also Zippleback gas or Monstrous Nightmare saliva.

Fishlegs was more difficult to figure out. He needed both hands on Meatlug most of the time, and wouldn't be comfortable holding something and trying to keep his balance, especially since Meatlug was a slow and sometimes uneven flyer.

"What if we gave him things to toss down to Meatlug, like small rocks for her to turn into lava?"

"He has some already," Hiccup had replied, leaning back against Toothless and tapping his charcoal against his chin, looking off into the treetops. "His saddle has compartments for rocks, and he keeps them full. It's good ballast."

"We could ask him," Astrid said. "He's probably already thought of weapons he could use."

"That's true," Hiccup agreed, though he didn't like not being able to come up with anything for Fishlegs. He sat forward and sketched Fishlegs' back on Meatlug, adding twisting lines for the fur on his vest and thicker spikes on Meatlug's tail as he thought some more.

"What about me?"

Hiccup looked up. Astrid was leaning close to him, looking at his notebook, and he could see her hair was drying in the evening air, turning from gold to blonde. He cleared his throat.

"There's a weapon you don't have, or aren't already an expert with? Where?" Hiccup put down his pencil and pretended to look around, lifting Toothless' tail and peeking under it, prompting Toothless to growl at him and prompting Astrid to punch him in the arm.

"Ow!"

"You deserved that."

He thought for a second about moving away from her, but gave up. He couldn't.

"Your axe is your favorite weapon, right?"

"Yes, it is," Astrid agreed, turning her comb over in her hands.

"What if we built a better axe mount for your saddle, behind you so it's within reach but high enough that it's not a danger to Stormfly?"

Hiccup turned to a new page and started drawing the saddle with a wooden curve behind it that would hold her axe. He added some notes about braiding leather for netting underneath to hold smaller

weapons.

"Can it hold two?"

He stopped his pencil, then nodded. "Sure. Side by side?"

"That would work. I have two axes now. I like them both," she said. He glanced up at her, and her smile made his face burn again.

He drew a wider frame behind the saddle, then sketched in the axes, including the metal rings on the one he'd made for her, and, because he was already adding detail, drew Stormfly's back and tail behind the saddle, curved as if she were in mid-air and flying fast.

Astrid smiled down at the image of her dragon.

"How do you do that?"

"Do what?" He kept sketching, not looking up, adding Stormfly's quills and her hind legs. His charcoal was flying across the page, adding the saddle straps, then shading in where compartments could be placed for more storage. He paused to make notes in the corner as to what materials to use, then continued to fill in the page. Within the space of a few breaths, most of Stormfly was present, along with a saddle that he thought would be a challenge, but a lot of fun to build.

"How do you draw what's in your mind so clearly, so people can see it? Or draw people or dragons so accurately?"

"I told you, not so much people," he replied, shaking his head. He was still sketching, the image filling the paper edge to edge.

"It's amazing," she said.

"It should be fun to build," he replied with a nod.

"No, Hiccup," she elbowed him in the side. "The drawing. You're amazing."

He shrugged, but smiled as he glanced at her. "Thanks. Mostly I draw to make room in my head. Otherwise—" he gestured with his pencil. "It gets crowded, too many ideas to remember."

"I know that feeling," she said softly.

"Yeah?" He looked up at her, his pencil falling silent on the page.

It was Astrid's turn to shrug. "Sure. But I don't draw. I throw my axe at things until I feel better."

He laughed. "I'll try to stay out of range."

She frowned at him. "Ha ha, very funny. I'm like you - not so much people... though I'm tempted sometimes."

He looked down at the page again, but sat up when he felt Astrid shiver.

"Ready to head back?"

"Yeah, it's getting cold. Plus fire and food await us."

"OK, then." He reached up and slid his notebook and pencil in to the saddlebag above his head. Astrid jumped down and put her comb in her bag before bringing it over to the rock. Toothless was stretching, ready to fly back, grumbling at Hiccup. He didn't know if there was a way dragons communicated "boring," but Toothless was fluent in that one concept. He'd had more than enough of the hot springs.

Hiccup reached for his leg. Then he stopped.

"Need help?" Astrid had hopped up onto the rock next to him, dropping her bag down next to her.

"Uh, no. Thanks. Um. I'm - I'm good."

"Ok, then."

She sat down, curled her legs in front of her and waited.

What in Thor's name was going on? He couldn't â€¦ do that in front of her. And she seemed intent on watching.

Hiccup rubbed his hand through his hair, not sure of what to do.

"What's wrong? You ok?"

He reached down and felt the skin of his leg. It was dry. They could head home at any time.

Astrid's face fell. "Youâ€¦ you want me to leave?"

"No, no." He did, but not if it meant she sounded like that.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Iâ€¦." He looked at her. Might as well be honest. "I've never done thisâ€¦ with anybody before."

Astrid looked shocked. Then her left eyebrow raised slowly, and it wasn't until he could see the laughter escaping the corners of her mouth that he realized what he'd just said.

"Oh, Gods. I meanâ€¦. Oh, forget it."

Astrid laughed until she had to wipe tears from her eyes, brought herself under control, and then lost it again when she looked at Hiccup.

"Yeah. Ohâ€¦ that's great." He covered his face with his hand, feeling how hot his skin was. Maybe his head actually would catch fire now, and he'd pass out. That would be helpful.

"Oh, Hiccup. I-" Astrid shut her mouth abruptly.

He looked at her. "You what?"

She shook her head.

"I give you possibly the most embarrassing thing I've ever said, in the entire history of my life - a life that's marked by many an embarrassing moment, I might add - and you're not going to finish your sentence?"

"No," she said, trying to hold in more laughter.

He shook his head, and sighed. Then he rolled up the fabric on his leg a little higher to make room for the straps. Astrid wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin on her knees, watching his movements. _Oh, well_, he thought to himself. It's not like his leg was going to grow back. He couldn't hide forever.

He moved the prosthesis in place, and with easy, automatic movements, wrapped the leather straps that held it in place around his leg. Then he twisted the cuff below so it tightened enough to be comfortable but snug, and lowered his pant leg over it.

He didn't want to glance over at Astrid, but he couldn't help himself. Her face was calm, andâ€| not disgusted. Or curious in the way he'd seen some people watching Gobber in the forge, with almost leering expressions that made him want to throw things at them. Astrid would never do that, and he knew it, but he hadn't been lying when he said he'd never attached his leg in front of anyone before. Outside of Gobber, and his father, he tended to keep that part of his life to himself.

But right then, Astrid wasâ€|herself. Her chin still rested on her knees, and she was looking at him the same way she always did, with an expression that he could never fully interpret but didn't seem negative. Her eyes were calm, her mouth curved in a faint smile, and she didn't look away from him. Then her mouth curved into the slightly wicked smile he knew very well, and she leaned in and kissed him.

Her left hand moved to curl behind his neck and pull him closer. As he reached for her, her other hand met his, and she grabbed on to him, lacing her fingers and holding tight. Her mouth opened slightly, and their kiss deepened, until Toothless let out a decidedly impatient growl at them both, thumping his tail fin on the rock.

Hiccup pulled away as Astrid started to laugh, and looked over his shoulder at Toothless.

"Really, bud?"

Astrid stood up, still laughing. "Sorry. We're leaving now. You can have dinner soon."

Toothless purred at her and lowered his body so Astrid could climb onto the saddle. Hiccup handed her bag up to her, then looked over at Toothless. Toothless glowered at him, and he glared back, though he looked away first. He reached up and climbed onto the saddle. And then they were in the air, the rock and the hot springs falling away behind them.

50. Chapter 50: Learning New Languages

****Learning New Languages****

When they lifted off the rock straight into the sky, Astrid was relieved to be sitting behind Hiccup. The straps of her bag were across her body, the weight of it behind her. Her arms were around him, and she was glad he couldn't see her face. He was slightly taller than she was, and would have to turn around to see her expression, but she still rested her nose on his shoulder, hiding her mouth.

She knew she affected Hiccup, but she hadn't realized how much. Not just kissing, which affected her, too, but other things.

Going to find him before she'd finished combing her hair hadn't been a deliberate decision on her part. She hadn't meant to embarrass or unnerve him.

But she had.

And she was a bit ashamed of herself that she'd enjoyed it.

It was always a little fun to tease Hiccup, because his ears, or his face, always turned red and he so clearly wanted to hide his reaction and couldn't. She'd always been able to read him, to know what was going through his mind. Most of the time, anyway.

Today, though. Today was different. It had stung a little that he hadn't wanted her to see him attaching his leg, and she didn't understand. Why didn't he want her to see? Didn't he know that?

She frowned. Maybe he didn't.

She lowered her head until her forehead rested on his shoulder. There was a lot she didn't know how to say.

She wanted to know if he'd ever tried to draw her - to draw her face. She'd seen multiple versions of her braid in his notebook, which had made his entire face turn red, and had made her feel like she'd swallowed the hot springs, all warm and fizzy inside.

But she couldn't ask him. She wanted to, but she couldn't. Still so many questions between them that she couldn't ask, and it made her angry, a little. Normally she'd pick up her axe and charge through any fear. But charging through her fear felt like the wrong tactic, as if what she was trying to understand was too fragile for that.

She didn't like feeling unsure, though. His hesitation was confusing her, too. He'd look away, every time she expected him to look towards her. Sometimes they understood one another perfectly, and other times, it was impossible to figure out what he was doing, why it felt like he was pulling away. The language of their friendship, which had evolved over years of growing up together, was easy. The language of something other than friendship between them was foreign to her.

Astrid lifted her head and looked out over Toothless' wings as they

flew. The cove where she'd first seen Toothless passed below them, and she moved her arms across Hiccup's chest, her palms flat against him. She could feel his heartbeat, strong and a little fast, and the tense ridges of his abdomen beneath her palms.

She realized then how much of her body was touching his, and her own heart sped up. Her legs were alongside his, her stomach pressed against his back, and she fought the urge to move her hands over him again.

Then he moved his left hand from Toothless' saddle, and pressed it against hers, over his heart. Her own stuttered a moment. He didn't move his hand from hers.

She turned her head and kissed the skin above his collar where his shoulder met his neck. He flinched and she felt it everywhere, his hand leaving hers to grab onto the saddle again. She closed her eyes, resting her forehead on his shoulder again.

"I'm sorry. I know you're ticklish," she said softly.

"Not ticklish there," he answered quickly. Too quickly, she guessed, because she could feel him freeze, holding himself perfectly still when he realized what he'd said.

She was quiet a long moment. Maybe they weren't so far apart. Maybe she did know a language that he understood, too.

She rested her chin on his shoulder gently. He gradually relaxed against her, and she tightened her arms around him. His left hand returned to hers, and he laced their fingers together, still over his heart.

She couldn't resist indulging herself, and attempting to communicate what she didn't know how to say.

Slowly, so he wouldn't notice immediately, she turned her head and ran her cheek softly alongside his neck, nuzzling him behind his ear. She felt the shiver move through his body, and his fingers tightened over hers. His hair was dry, and his skin was warm beneath the cold wind. She closed her eyes and caught the scent of the sky, the wind, and the hot springs as she slowly moved her lips over his skin.

She kissed the same spot again, the curve of his neck above the collar of his shirt, and he didn't flinch this time. His hand tightened over hers, and his breath became more uneven.

"You're very dangerous."

"Yup," she agreed, keeping her voice low.

He shook his head, shifted Toothless' direction slightly to the east, and put his other hand on her leg, which rested alongside his. He didn't move his hand, but her skin beneath his touch, beneath her leggings, burned like fire, and the sensation made her shift her position in the saddle, moving away, then closer to him. She leaned her head forward over his shoulder so she could see his face. He glanced over at her, with that half smile that made her feel so much contented joy.

Maybe she was more fluent than she thought. Astrid tightened her fingers around his, and rested her chin on his shoulder again.

"So are you," she said.

...

As they flew over the treetops toward Berk, she saw fires burning in various parts of the village. It was warm enough to stay outside later into the darkness, and their friends would probably have started their bonfire already.

"Can you drop me by my house, and I'll meet you by the fire?"

"Sure," he said, leaning to the right so Toothless would tilt over beneath them. She felt herself shifting off the saddle and feared for a second she'd fall off.

"Hiccup! I didn't mean literally!" Her fingers gripped his and she pulled her other arm tight against his stomach, feeling the muscles beneath her hand tighten as he laughed.

"You know I wouldn't," he laughed, as Toothless righted himself beneath them, flying level in a slow descent toward Astrid's home.

She leaned forward and bit Hiccup, not too lightly, on the shoulder.

"Hey!"

"You know I wouldn't," she replied. He murmured something, but she missed what he said. Before she could badger him into telling her, he shifted to the side so he could look at her.

"Where do you want us to land?"

She looked at him, and forgot all the words she knew. His cheeks were flushed from the cool wind, and his hair was pretty much going in every direction at once as usual, but he looked so content. Hiccup, flying on Toothless, with her arms around him and his hand holding hers against his heart, looked like happiness, so beautiful she didn't want to land at all.

But she had to - and it was time to eat, after all.

"Just above, on the hill."

He nodded, still grinning. "You got it. Toothless?"

Toothless growled and purred, sounding equally happy, his tongue hanging out, eyes looking back at the two of them. He circled down and landed on the slope above her house, where the grass was beginning to grow, wisps of pale green poking through the ice and slush.

Astrid started to pull her hand from his, but Hiccup held tight for a moment.

"Toothless? Come on, bud, you owe me."

Before Astrid could ask what he meant, Toothless grumbled at Hiccup, then lifted his wings high into the air, surrounding them both and blocking them from view.

Hiccup let go of her hand, shifted sideways on the saddle and turned toward Astrid so he faced her. He lifted his hand and brushed her hair back from her face with his fingertips. He smiled as he looked at her hair, which was probably windblown and as much a mess as his. Then he looked into her eyes.

He brought his lips to hers and kissed her, as deeply as before, only this time they weren't interrupted. She grabbed onto his shirt and pulled him closer, her heart racing when, a moment later, he pulled away, slowly. Then he smiled at her again, so close that she could not miss how his grin touched every part of his face.

He didn't say anything. But she understood. Mostly.

"See you in a bit?"

He nodded.

Toothless lowered his wings, and she jumped off. Hiccup and Toothless were back in the sky heading toward his home before she got to her door. She hurried toward her room upstairs, then hurried back outside.

The night wasn't over yet.

51. Chapter 51: Warmer Evenings

****Warmer Evenings****

When Hiccup climbed the stairs to the fire pit over the cliffs, everyone was already there. He stopped at the entrance and looked around, stunned. Not only was everyone there, but they were in their regular positions around the fire, the same places since they'd entered the academy together.

Gobber was with them, too, telling stories of building Mornen's house, and how long it had taken them to hit water, all of the builders swearing there was no way a well was that far below her land. The length of time it took to reach the well changed with every telling.

Hiccup grabbed a spear and a large fish, and sat down in his usual spot, between Tuffnut and Gobber, across from Astrid and Fishlegs. Snotlout was leaning against one of the wooden posts, slowly turning a piece of chicken over the fire. He was frowning, his eyebrows down over his eyes so far they were barely visible, but he didn't look particularly angry. He usually wore that expression when Hookfang refused to listen to him, and he knew he'd been clear in his commands. Snotlout had a dragon as stubborn as he was.

The sparks from the fire flew into the air with a cracking sound and drifted away out toward the sea. Hiccup watched the tiny lights disappear as Gobber and Fishlegs debated which dragon could cause the

most damage if all they had to arm themselves with was water. Scauldrons were the obvious choice, but Fishlegs was convinced that Meatlug could heat water if she had to.

Normally, Hiccup would debate with them, but he didn't feel like talking. Mostly, he wanted to watch. Was anyone looking at him strangely? Was anyone, specifically Snotlout, being unkind to Astrid? Were the twins going to tease him at some point? He was waiting for the change in their demeanor, confirmation that allowing Snotlout to anger him had been a mistake.

But the group seemed the same as always. Gobber bragged and told stories that grew increasingly ridiculous. Fishlegs argued with him. Tuff asked obvious questions, and Ruff teased him about it. Astrid glared at them both, and Snotlout frowned into the fire like he was trying to figure something out and the frustration was giving him a headache.

Better steer clear of him for awhile, Hiccup thought.

Then Tuffnut stood up to get himself more food and started telling everyone about how brilliantly he'd trained Barf and Belch to fart on command, using his cooking spear as a prop. Everyone with sense, which meant everyone except Ruff, shifted away from him. Snotlout slid down the bench until he was next to Hiccup.

Hiccup looked over at him briefly, then returned his attention to the fire. The nice thing about bonfires was that he didn't have to talk if he didn't want to. With a fire going, and food to cook, and people willing to discuss various types of dragon gas for hours on end, he didn't have to speak. He could listen, and watch the lights change, and still feel part of the group.

He didn't want that feeling to be endangered by his temper. But it didn't seem like it had been.

Then Snotlout spoke, his voice low.

"It was you, wasn't it?"

Hiccup turned toward him, leaning back, a little wary.

"It was you. That was your drawing. Of Mornen."

Hiccup looked closely at Snotlout's face. He didn't seem to be trying to hold his expression in place. There was no mockery leaking at the edges of his mouth or eyes. He was serious.

"Yeah. Um, yes. That was, that was me."

Snotlout nodded, and looked back at the fire pit, turning the spear over to cook the other side of his chicken.

"Thank you," he said in a quiet, sad voice that Hiccup had never heard him use before.

"You're welcome."

Hiccup tried to keep his mouth shut. He tried to tell himself it didn't matter, but he couldn't help himself.

"How did you not know I drew that? I signed it."

"You did? Where?"

"On the back," Hiccup said. He glanced to his right. Astrid was listening to them. Her head was tipped back to rest on the railing behind her, and her eyes were closed, but he could tell she heard every word they said. She was relaxed, but aware.

Snotlout scoffed, resting one arm on his knee. "Why would I turn it over? The picture's on the front."

"That's true." Hiccup shook his head slightly, and gave up.

"It's a really good picture."

"Thanks," Hiccup replied, a little unnerved by the conversation. He had little experience with quiet and almost kind Snotlout. He glanced at him, and Snotlout grinned his typical cocky smirk in return. Back to normal.

Then Snotlout stood up, stretched - while flexing his arm muscles, Hiccup noted - and moved over closer to Ruffnut. Definitely back to normal.

With absolutely no subtlety, he collapsed onto the bench next to her with a grunt, deliberately knocking her helmet askew. When she reached up to straighten it, Snotlout leaned over and did it for her, then placed his arm behind her on the railing.

Ruff looked at Snotlout like he'd grown another head, a very unattractive one.

Snotlout was unconcerned. He smirked at her, then started arguing with Tuffnut about the strength of their respective dragons in several key areas, including offensive smells.

Hiccup glanced over at Astrid, who was watching the three of them with a somewhat appalled expression. But she must have felt Hiccup's attention, because she turned her head.

Before he could speak to her, though, Gobber interrupted.

"Hiccup! Almost forgot. Have a message for you from your father."

"He's not here?"

"Nope, sailed west this morning, back day after tomorrow. Says he'll need you to help him fix his saddle."

"I can... do that," Hiccup replied, frowning. That didn't seem like a message his father would need to tell him prior to a voyage. He looked up at Gobber, who was grinning so wide, the fire was gleaming off the rock he used for a tooth. Weird.

Gobber finished his dinner, again telling Fishlegs that there was no chance a Gronckle could boil water. Fishlegs disagreed, and they went round the same points a few more times. Hiccup was content to listen,

eat his dinner, and watch the others.

He tried not to look at Astrid too much, and was helped by the fact that she was wearing her armor again. He could still see her, in his head, wearing a tunic, her hair down, the image like a secret between them. He wasn't planning on forgetting it, but, he thought as he shifted position on the bench, he probably shouldn't think about it too much, either.

There were a lot more secrets between them now. He didn't think he had room inside his mind for many more.

"Hey, Hiccup," Tuffnut said, still standing by the fire, turning a small chicken to char - his method of cooking it. "Astrid said you have new weapons for us to try."

Hiccup shrugged. "I haven't built them yet, but yeah, I'm working on some things."

"Look, I need something big," Tuffnut advised him. "To go with my status as a deadly weapon of epic destruction."

"You already have that weapon, usually after too much cabbage," Ruff said, snickering.

"At least it's not the size of your butt," he fired back, and Ruff stood up to punch him.

"No, it's okay," Snotlout said to her. "I told you before, a dragonesque physique is great!"

Ruff turned and punched Snotlout in the head, knocking his helmet down to the plaza below them.

"No worries, be right back!" Snotlout leapt up, and sailed down the staircase. Ruffnut rolled her eyes and moved closer to Astrid.

Then Gobber stood up to leave. As he turned toward the stairs, he stopped and said, "Come by the forge tomorrow, Astrid. I'll see if we have what you're looking for."

She nodded at him, looking uncomfortable - and as usual, Gobber was oblivious. His steps on the stairs were loud and typically uneven, and Hiccup listened to make sure there weren't any interruptions in Gobber's gait.

Astrid came to sit next to him, gesturing for Ruffnut to join them.

"So, what about you?" Astrid helped herself some of Hiccup's fish. He didn't mind. He'd deliberately chosen a larger fish, figuring she'd end up eating some as usual.

"Me?"

"What weapon did you design for yourself?"

"Does it explode? Because if so, I want to use it on Tuffnut," Ruff added.

Snotlout came thumping up the wooden steps and found the seating rearranged, with no room for him on their bench. He glared at Hiccup, then pushed Fishlegs aside so he could sit across from them.

They debated weaponry, and decided what they'd do in the dragon academy that week. Snotlout described the watering system at Mornen's house and took all the credit, which Fishlegs protested with much spluttering outrage. Ruffnut quietly tried to convince Hiccup to build her some sort of detonation device that she could put under Tuff's pillow - confirming his suspicions that neither of them were above sabotaging someone's bed. Astrid laughed at his horrified expression, and snuck more pieces of his fish off his plate.

The sparks from their fire continued to rise into the sky, and their voices filled the space between them.

52. Chapter 52: One More Flight

****One More Flight****

A few hours later, Hiccup said goodnight and walked back to his house, the first of the group to do so. The moon had risen high into the darkness above Berk, and it covered everything in silver and shadows. He slowly climbed up the hill toward his house, watching the moonlight glinting off his leg, the stones on the path, and the tiles on the roof.

Then a shadow moved across the top of his house, accompanied by a loud thump and a quiet grumble.

"Hey, Toothless. Waiting for me?"

Toothless responded by banging his tail on the roof again, and calling to Hiccup with a low staccato growl.

"Night flight, huh?"

Hiccup stopped, and turned around, looking at Berk from the steps of his home. If Gobber was to be believed, and he probably was, Stoick was gone for two nights, which meant Hiccup was, for lack of a better term, acting chief. A patrol from above wouldn't be a bad idea.

"Did you know my dad sailed west today?"

Toothless didn't answer, but jumped down onto the mud on the side of the house, and came around to meet Hiccup in front.

"Shall we go take a look around, make sure all is well?"

Toothless purred and nudged Hiccup with his head, grinning with his mouth open when Hiccup reached over and scratched behind his head.

"Let's go, bud."

Hiccup didn't think he'd ever get over the rush of feeling Toothless crouch against the ground, then spring into flight, the pressure against his chest and the feeling of freedom that came with leaving the earth behind. They circled his house once, then again as

Toothless stretched his wings out and shook his shoulders.

"You're going to have to lay off the roof banging, Toothless. Looks like you've loosened a lot of shingles."

Toothless grumbled in reply, shaking his head.

They turned and slowly glided over the eastern border of the island, keeping the cliffs below them. Hiccup could see the bonfire in the distance, and judging from the shadows moving around the flames, it looked like everyone was still there. He smiled.

Then Toothless turned his head and banked sharply to the right, circling lower toward the cliff edge.

"Toothless, what is it? What's wrong?"

Toothless purred his answer, which told Hiccup nothing, and continued to circle lower and lower. Then Hiccup saw it - a flash, then another, on the rock below the path leading down to the docks.

"What is that?"

Toothless didn't seem alarmed, but was intent on flying level with the flash of light.

"What are you doing, bud?"

Then Toothless landed on the cliff path, leaping forward twice before stopping.

"Whoa, bud. What the - I don't think we -"

"Hey, Toothless." A soft voice came from behind one of the rocks.

"Astrid?"

Toothless growled happily at her.

"Got my signal, huh?" She stepped out into the moonlight and reached for Toothless' chin. Hiccup stared at them both.

"How many signals do you guys have?"

"A few?" She smiled at him, very smug.

Hiccup shook his head at both of them, nudging Toothless with his right foot. Toothless growled, looking very pleased with himself.

"Where are you going?"

"Patrol. Once or twice around Berk. Not far. If my dad's not here -"

Hiccup trailed off, noticing that something was missing.

"Where's your shoulder armor? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. It's in a tree."

"In a tree?"

Astrid nodded, but didn't elaborate.

"Why in a tree?"

"Good hiding place. No one expects to see armor in a tree, plus no one will trip over it."

"Ok. But _why_ is your armor in a tree?"

"Because it's shiny, and I might be seen otherwise."

He looked at her, completely confused.

"Can I join you?"

Then he understood.

And as much as he wanted to say yes, to have her fly with him, even for a little while, he knew he had to say no. Responsibility was the opposite of fun most of the time.

"I think it's ok, Hiccup."

"I don't think so," he said, not hiding his regret. "What about your family?"

"Funny thing, actually," she said, coming closer to Hiccup while rubbing Toothless behind his ears. She placed her other hand on Hiccup's leg, and he tried not to react or move or breathe or anything like that. "I was on my way home, and Gobber wasâ€¦I think he was waiting for me."

"Gobber?"

"Yeah. He was just..standing in the plaza, looking at the moon. When I said goodnight, he said, 'Aye. It is a good night. Good night for flying.'" Her imitation of Gobber was terrible.

"That's... odd."

"I know. Then he said it was too bad Stormfly is so visible at night."

"He's not wrong but stillâ€¦ weird." Hiccup was going to have to ask Gobber some questions next time they were in the forge together.

"It gets weirder. He nodded up the hill toward your house and walked off without saying another word."

"He did?"

"Yes. So I think he was telling me to go fly with you."

"Yeah, but Gobber wouldn't get the angry visit from your mother if we get caught."

Astrid laughed. "We won't get caught. That's why my armor is in a tree."

Hiccup just stared at her.

"And," she said, reaching behind her to pull her hood over her hair. "I'll cover my hair, too."

"Right. Because it's not at all impossible that I've turned into two people in the course of one evening."

"Hiccup, I think it's fine. Please?"

Hiccup knew he should say no. He should, but he didn't want to. He lowered his head and shook it.

"Ok, fine, but if your mom comes after me, at least lend me your axe."

"I'll be using it," Astrid said, taking his hand and climbing up behind him.

"You will?"

"Yup. I can totally take her down."

Hiccup laughed, then forced himself into stillness when Astrid put her arms around his waist.

"Ready?"

"Guess so," he replied. "Toothless? Shall we continue or are there other people on the cliffs you need to pick up?"

Toothless snarled at him, but without his teeth so it wasn't nearly as menacing, then leapt into the air. He flew parallel to the cliffs, then down to the docks to sweep over the surface of the water. The moon lit the waves in an endless ripple of silver and cobalt. Then they flew higher to circle over Berk together.

53. Chapter 53: Understanding the Past

****Understanding the Past****

"No one down on the docks," Astrid noted, looking around.

"Shouldn't be, this time of night," Hiccup replied, glancing to his right, but not to look at the harbor. He was looking at her.

"So why are we here?"

"Staying out of sight as much as possible."

"Is that your patrol technique or your paranoia?"

"A little of both?" He turned his head, one side of his mouth lifted in a half smile, a look she felt every time she saw it, like a warm tingle in her chest. That smile was hers.

She didn't reply, but she wound her arms tighter around him, and rested her chin on his shoulder. He looked down at her, lifting one

hand to move the side of her hood back. She peeked out from beneath the shadows and smiled at him.

"I knew it," she said, still grinning.

"Knew what?"

"You wanted me all to yourself."

Hiccup laughed, but didn't reply. She knew he was thinking something, because his cheeks turned red along with his ears. She thought briefly of nudging him until he told her, but decided against it. Considering the possibilities was a lot more fun.

Toothless ascended slowly up to the cliffs west of Berk, keeping them in the shadows as much as possible. Even though it had seemed warm while they were by the fire, it was now much colder, and Astrid moved closer to him as the wind blew over them.

"You ok?"

"Yup," she said softly into his ear.

Then he sat up straight and looked over at her again.

"About Gobber," he said. Astrid leaned over so she could see his face, and reached up to tap his lips with her fingertips.

"I'm not answering that question."

"But -"

"Nope."

"What did you need in-"

"Hiccup." Her hand covered his mouth with a little more force. "Not answering."

"I know where you're ticklish," he said, turning to look at her, moving away from her hand.

"I know where you're ticklish, too," she replied, one eyebrow raised.

He raised an eyebrow right back at her, and covered her hands with his so she couldn't move them for a moment. She froze, then leaned forward over his shoulder.

"Please don't ask me? Or tickle me?"

He pretended to think about it, but the effect was ruined by the strength he had to use to keep her from moving her hands out from under his.

"All right," he agreed, slowly. She slipped one hand free and poked him under the arm.

"Hey, no tickling me, either."

Astrid moved her head back and slid her arms around his chest again.

They flew over the forest back toward Berk from the south, the mountain behind them, flying through the fog so it obscured parts of their flight from below. Toothless coasted over the western side of Berk again, then circled the cliffs and the docks before flying higher and heading out over the western sea.

"Not too far, bud. We can't go exploring tonight."

"Have you been?"

"Exploring? Yeah. Found a new island the other day."

"Really?"

He nodded. "About three or so hours away? For you and Stormfly, I mean. If Meatlug were trying to get there, more like four and a half." He wasn't being mean, she knew. Hiccup preferred accuracy in all things, especially anything having to do with flight. That was why Mornen's ship had flown as well as it had. Because Hiccup had planned it.

They flew into the wind, and she ducked behind him a bit. Toothless turned back toward Berk while it was still visible on the horizon behind them, and sailed over the cliffs, up toward Mornen's home. It was dark, but the moon lit the house and gleamed on the tray on the roof, mostly covered with ice.

"Can we land for a minute? Check the garden, see if the watering system is working?"

"Sure," Hiccup replied.

Toothless circled lower and lower over the garden, then landed by the side of the house. Astrid jumped off the saddle, and Hiccup detached his leg from the tail fin mechanism and slid down after her.

"How you doing, bud?" Hiccup moved to Toothless' head, looking him in the eyes. "Too cold for you?"

Toothless rolled his eyes and grinned at Hiccup, clearly very happy to be flying at night. Astrid wandered over to the garden and looked up to the eaves of the house, then followed the metal pieces from the roof down to the soil. She felt the garden where the metal ended. Wet, but not soaking. It was working.

"Looks good," Hiccup said, standing behind her.

"Yeah," she replied softly.

"It'll freeze tonight," he said. "But that shouldn't be a problem. It'll melt in the morning when the sun rises."

Astrid laughed, a whisper of sound. "Snotlout was right."

"That he was," Hiccup said, sounding as surprised as she was. Then he paused. "Astrid, about Snotlout. I'm"

She turned, and saw him frowning, looking angry and unsure.

"I'm sorry, if I did the wrong thing. I-" He sighed, looking at the ground, glaring.

She moved closer to him, and waited for him to look up. "I'm not mad. Snotlout's ridiculous, but at least he's got a clue now."

He nodded, looking down again, then up at the roof, echoing her movements earlier. He followed the metal paths with his eyes, scrutinizing each joint, looking at the ground below to check for evidence of leaks, maybe. But when she spoke again, he looked at her.

"It's stupid that as many times as I've made it clear I wasn't interested, you convinced him to back off by glaring at him," she said.

Hiccup nodded slowly. "He isn't among the most...perceptive people."

Astrid laughed. "That was diplomatic of you."

He smiled briefly, then looked up at the roof again. "It seems like days ago we were here, but it was this morning. Feels like longer."

Astrid moved next to him and took his hand. His fingers intertwined with hers, and she put her other hand on his arm, leaning close to him. "It does. Weird."

They turned, still holding hands, and walked back to where Toothless was waiting. He was rubbing his nose on some strands of dragon grass that had begun to grow by the house.

Hiccup noticed. "Huh. Mornen planted dragon grass?"

Astrid stopped suddenly, but held onto Hiccup's hand, even though he had stepped forward without her. He turned to look at her, but she was looking at the dragon grass. Then at the house. A cold shock moved through her.

"Astrid, what's wrong?"

She looked at him, tears stinging her eyes. "She knew."

He frowned, shaking his head.

"Mornen. She knew."

He moved closer and took her other hand in his, facing her. "Knew what?"

Astrid felt like the wind was inside her mind, inside her body. His hands over hers kept her steady, but only just. "She knew. Years ago."

He waited. She blinked, trying to clear her eyes, though a few tears escaped and ran down her cheek, leaving icy cold behind.

"Years ago, before dragon training, before â€|Toothless, the Great Battle. I was probablyâ€|" she paused, thinking back. Her hair hadn't been as long, and she hadn't had her shoulder armor yet. "I was nine, maybe. Or ten?"

Hiccup nodded, still holding her hands, keeping them warm inside his, rubbing his thumb over her skin. It was the only part of her that was warm but she needed the cold.

Astrid looked over his shoulder at the front path to the house, remembering everything with a clarity that scared her.

"I came to visit. And she greeted me at the door and looked so strange. And she said - I just remembered. Hiccup, she said -" Astrid swallowed then looked up at his face. He looked so worried. She smiled through the shock that covered her.

"She said, 'One day, you'll fly here.'"

Hiccup shifted back, eyes wide. "Whoa."

"Yes. I hadn't thought about it in years. But then-" Astrid squeezed his hands and took a deep breath, her heart racing. "There's more. She said, 'You'll fly here, and it won't be what you intended. But it will be right.'"

Hiccup frowned.

Astrid looked up at his face, and felt a kind of joy move through her, replacing the cold shock with warmth.

"She knew. She knew," Astrid repeated. "I didn't think anything of it, figuring she meant that I'd be running, and that my visit would be a surprise or something. But that's not what she meant. She meant now. Right now."

Then she moved toward Hiccup, wrapping her arms around his waist and laying her head on his shoulder, her forehead against his neck. She felt him hold her more tightly. Without her armor she was closer to him, his arms across her shoulders, keeping her warm. She felt him kiss her hair, then rest his chin on her head. It felt for a moment like he was speaking, but she didn't hear his voice.

She didn't want to move, so she closed her eyes and thought of her great aunt, and it didn't hurt as much as it had since she'd died. Somehow, her aunt had known. Astrid felt the love and welcome she thought she wouldn't experience again, being held in the moon shadow of Mornen's home, tucked into the warmth of Hiccup's arms, feeling the beat of his heart so close to her own.

She turned her head, then hugged him tighter.

"You ok?" He whispered in her ear.

She pulled back to look at him, a smile on her face, though her eyes were still a little wet.

"Yes. Better than ok. Thank you."

She put her hand on his face, and reached up to kiss him gently.

Then, the temperature between them changed abruptly, and her mouth slanted under his. She wanted to devour him.

He was the one who broke their kiss first, kissing her again, then again, both of them breathing fast.

"We-"

"I know, Hiccup," she said, looking at his mouth, then up into his eyes. She wanted to say something, but didn't have the right words. She put her fingertips on his lips, and he smiled beneath them, the familiar green of his eyes warming her. Maybe he understood. He probably did. And if not, she'd figure out a way to tell him at some point.

"Let's fly home," she said. She kept her hand tucked into his as they walked over to Toothless, who was still trying to coax more dragon grass out from under the mud. His nose was a mess of dirt and slush.

"Are you going back to the island you discovered?" Astrid asked as she climbed on behind Hiccup.

"Tonight? No," he replied.

"No, after your dad is back."

He nodded. "I keep meaning to go back and try to see if there are other islands there, maybe add them to the map, but haven't had time. And if dad's not here, I can't really go flying out for hours on my own."

"But you can patrol."

"That I can do. And, you know," he said, glancing at her with a grin. "If Berk needed a few extra patrols from the air each night he's gone, just to make sure all is well, I can do that."

Astrid laughed. "I'm sure you can. Can I patrol with you tomorrow, too?"

"Always."

She tightened her grip on him for a moment.

"I wasn't expecting to see you again today," he added.

"No?"

"Well, you were still at the fires when I left."

"Just doing what Gobber told me to do."

"Glad you did," he said softly. She moved her head, and kissed the spot above his collar again. Then she rested her cheek on his back and closed her eyes.

A few moments later, they landed. Toothless picked nearly the same spot along the cliff edge, and shook himself once he'd dug his claws into the ground.

Hiccup shifted to the side and turned toward Astrid. Her face was in the shadows of her hood again, but she smiled at him, as happy to have been flying as he and Toothless were.

"Good night," he said.

"Not going to kiss me?"

He shifted back a bit, moving his fingertips over her lips, across her cheek, brushing her hair back. "Not sure if I should," he said, frowning.

"Hiccup. Of course you should. Come here." She kissed him again, and instead of fire between them, this time there was more joy, so much that they were smiling as they moved apart. Astrid had no idea that kisses could be different from one another, but now she was curious about discovering all of them. She wanted to catalog them like the Book of Dragons, an index only for herself.

Then a voice above reached them both. "Why is there armor in a tree?"

Astrid gasped quietly and covered her mouth.

"Gobber?" Hiccup whispered. She nodded. Then she leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

"Goodnight, Hiccup. See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," he whispered back as she jumped down off Toothless, wished him goodnight as well, and headed up the hill toward her armor, and then her home.

He listened until the sounds of the nighttime animals resumed, signaling that there weren't any vikings around. Then he and Toothless leapt into the sky once more, and headed for the window in his room.

Once in bed, when he closed his eyes, he was smiling.

It had been a long, but perfect day.

54. Chapter 54: Sharing Explosives

****Sharing Explosives****

The following days were clear, each a little warmer than the one before, but still cold enough to require an extra layer when flying. But even with warm clothing, the dragon riders noticed that the sun stayed up longer, leaving room each evening for a bit more work, a bit more flying, and more time together as a group.

Between the academy, the forge, Mornen's garden and increased time with his father and the council, Hiccup was busy. But eventually he found enough time to work on his own projects. He built the weapons he'd designed for each of them, larger than what they'd been using previously - with the exception of Astrid's axe, which remained the same, and was as lethal as ever. Her saddle attachment worked

perfectly, she'd told him. She'd begun target practice while flying, standing up on Stormfly's back and throwing her axes over her dragon's head, embedding them in treetops, and, on a few occasions, chopping off whole branches in one try.

Snotlout's weapon was impressive, a modified slingshot mounted on a carved piece of wood that fit in either hand. But Hiccup had built it larger than necessary deliberately so that Snotlout would be distracted by the size and not notice the wide pieces of ammunition that went with it. The leather cases, sewn by Astrid, not that they'd tell anyone that, held three different options. Some held water to soak a dragon's head and put out it's fire. Others held Zippleback gas, though their experiments with containing it hadn't all worked. It tended to leak, so they'd left those packets at the academy.

The last set held small pellets made from the forge's scrap metal. The thought was that they'd scatter on impact, either making a surface slippery below an opponent, or creating enough surface wounds that whatever target they hit would fall back. Hiccup had discussed putting oil in some of them, to use for both smothering a dragon's fire and rendering landing areas too slippery to use, but they hadn't perfected the cases enough. Oil also tended to leak.

The twins each held a slingshot, one that would swing in a circle before it could throw for Ruffnut, who had better aim, and another that had two long stretching cords for Tuffnut, who had more upper arm strength - though only slightly more than his sister. He liked to think there was a significant difference, however.

Both slingshots fired anything that fit, including rocks, the small leather packets full of water, or whatever else the twins came up with. And of course, they came up with a number of options, most of which were too dangerous for them, or for Barf and Belch.

Fishlegs' weapon was not really a weapon, but an extension of his storage case for Meatlug's rocks. Alongside her "delicious ammunition," as Fishlegs called it, Hiccup had added an additional compartment where Fishlegs could stow a small crossbow, a sword, or some additional packets of water. Hiccup left the choice up to Fishlegs, which worked for them both: Hiccup had given him room to arm himself, while allowing Fishlegs to choose the weapon he wanted and was most comfortable wielding.

As they tested their new weapons in the academy, Astrid tried to convince Fishlegs to try an axe.

"They're the perfect weapon, I'm telling you. Most useful thing in the world."

"Yeah, Astrid, I know, but I'm not really an axe person."

"How do you know if you don't try?"

"I'm not sure I can throw it."

"Come on, I'll teach you," Astrid said, leading Fishlegs over to a target area.

Hiccup shook his head. Fishlegs wouldn't tell her no, but he clearly wasn't as enamored of axes as she was.

Then he laughed quietly to himself. She did say she slept with one under her pillow. No one was enamored of axes like Astrid.

"What are you laughing at?" Snotlout stood in front of him, frowning.

"Uhh, nothing. Something wrong, Snotlout?"

"Yeah. My ammunition's not heavy enough."

"Not heavy enough?"

"Yeah. The twins have large rocks for their slingshots, and--"

"Oh, gods," Hiccup sighed.

"I need something epic," Snotlout continued.

"Epic," Hiccup repeated.

"Yeah."

Hiccup thought quickly, looking around the academy. They did have the Zippleback gas packets. He could give him one that was likely to leak, just to placate him for their initial test. He didn't want Snotlout to feel slighted for having a weapon that wasn't meant to be precise.

He led Snotlout over to the basket and handed him a packet. "Don't tell anyone," he warned.

Snotlout's eyes grew wider. "What is this?"

"Zippleback gas."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. It explodes when hit with a spark--"

"I know that, Hiccup."

"Right. So be careful. If you fire it at someone with a torch, for example, dive as soon as you throw it, and get out of the way. It should explode."

"Awesome!"

"Glad you like it. But we're not using fire today, so warn me before you test it. We'll need to make a spark, and I need to see how it works."

"Sure, sure," Snotlout replied, already distracted by the packet of explosion he held in his hands. Hiccup didn't see him look at the device in his hand, and then over at Ruffnut.

...

A short while later, they were up in the air, headed toward some deserted islands where they could test their weapons. Hiccup had

mounted some targets on the tops of the cliffs, and assigned a rider to each one. Their job was to try to hit the target while flying past it, without stopping in midair to aim.

Fishlegs went first, and he'd chosen to arm himself with a small crossbow. Astrid shook her head at him, but didn't say anything. Hiccup watched closely. The arrows weren't large enough to penetrate the target, unfortunately, though Fishlegs managed to hit the target dead center each time.

"Hey, Fishlegs!" Hiccup called to him as Meatlug returned to her position on Toothless' right side. "That was some excellent shooting."

"Yeah, but the target's still standing," Snotlout pointed out.

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "I think you need a stronger arrow - come by the forge and we'll figure something out."

Fishlegs waved and nodded at him, smiling and rubbing Meatlug effusively on her head.

Astrid signaled Stormfly to dive down to the water, and lowered her body over Stormfly's neck as they increased speed. They circled back into the air, across from her target, and were flying close to Stormfly's full speed when Astrid jumped up. She picked up her axe, and threw it.

With a massive crash, it blasted through the target dead center, sending pieces in every direction. Astrid's axe flew through the pieces and landed behind the cliffs on the island.

"Let me get my axe before the twins fire," she called as the others cheered for her.

She hopped back down to Stormfly's back and rubbed her head. "Nice job, girl. Perfectly done."

When she was back in the air, her axe positioned alongside her training axe on the rack behind her, she signaled to Hiccup that they were clear to proceed.

"Ok, Ruff, Tuff, you know the rules. Fire at the same time, at each of your targets."

Ruffnut snickered. "Got it, Hiccup."

Hiccup was narrowing his eyes and about to stop them when Snotlout interrupted.

"Wait, Ruffnut! You forgot your ammo!"

Then he threw the packet of Zibbleback gas over to Ruffnut, just as Tuffnut produced a ball of something wet and a flint to light it on fire to aim at his target.

"No!" Hiccup shouted at them to stop, but it was too late. Tuffnut lit his ammunition, but the sparks touched some of the gas leaking from the packet as it flew by, igniting it. The flames followed the

trail of gas until they reached the remaining amounts tucked inside the leather. Then it exploded, just as Ruffnut fired her packet full of metal pieces.

"Dive!" Hiccup shouted, trying to spin Toothless out of the way. Toothless ducked out of the way of the pellets, which weren't traveling that fast, but the force of the explosion, which was closest to Hiccup, pushed him sideways off the saddle. He grunted with the effort to hold on to Toothless as he was forced away from him, and in the end, only the harness straps on his vest and the straps holding his leg on kept him connected to Toothless. When he climbed back to the center of the saddle, Toothless was circling for a place to land.

"No, Toothless, it's ok. You don't need to land," Hiccup said, wheezing. His chest hurt, as did his leg, but he was fine enough to fly.

When he reached the group, Astrid was standing on Stormfly's back, holding her axe, ready to bury it in Snotlout's head.

"What is wrong with you?"

"Hey, not my fault if Hiccup keeps all the good ammo to himself," Snotlout said, though he looked a little frightened.

"I didn't keep it to myself, Snotlout," Hiccup yelled. "I gave it to you."

"And I shared it it. Like a good friend would," he added, smiling at Ruffnut.

Hiccup rolled his eyes.

"Clearly, any experiments with Zippleback gas that is not from within the dragon itself are not happening any time soon," he said.

Ruffnut looked worried, and kicked her brother when he laughed about blowing Hiccup off his dragon.

"Are you ok, Hiccup?" She asked him quietly. Her brother gaped at her.

"I'm ok, Ruffnut. But thanks."

Then he added, "And no more fire for you, Tuffnut."

"Aw, come on. I need a weapon that equals my own ferocious dangerâ€¦ness."

"Eat more cabbage, then, dummy" his sister replied.

Hiccup shook his head again, and they headed back to Berk.

55. Chapter 55: Sneaking in by Candlelight

****Sneaking In by Candlelight****

Later that evening, Astrid hung around the plaza and the great hall

until the forge windows were dark and she was sure that Hiccup and Gobber had gone for the day. After their rather disastrous weapons experiments, Hiccup had gone to the forge, and she'd noticed he was walking slower than usual. But she hadn't followed him. She'd gone to collect all the ammunition packets she'd made, and hid them in her room after letting all the green gas out of each one. Then she'd had enough work around her home and at Mornen's to keep her busy until dinner.

She had looked up at the forge as she walked with her mother over to the great hall. The fire was high enough that it lit all the windows, so she knew someone was there.

But when she left an hour or so later, the light was gone. It was safe to go in.

When she entered, however, she discovered that the forge lights were never fully out. They left the hearth burning low, bits of wood glowing and casting waves of shadow around the room. Easier to start the fire the following day, she supposed, given that Gobber's dragon wasn't always reliable. Or awake.

The hearth provided the only light in the room, and once her eyes adjusted, she followed the deep orange glow through the room. It was slow going. The forge was illuminated just enough to make things she should have been able to recognize unfamiliar and scary.

Not scary, she told herself. Just weird.

She had her axe. She had nothing to be afraid of, she told herself.

Except maybe bumping into a pile of swords and dying a terribly humiliating death by accidental combat.

She stayed away from the walls.

Astrid figured the logical place to begin her search was Hiccup's room, which was in the back, and far from the light of the hearth. She picked up an old piece of a helmet with a low stub of candle melted into it and, using a piece of straw, lit the wick. The helmet piece was high enough on the sides that the candle didn't blow out as she crossed the room, and, once she placed it on the desk, the metal interior reflected the light onto Hiccup's bookshelf. Perfect.

She started by lifting the edges of the multiple stacks of paper with her fingers and peeking beneath them, but there wasn't enough light to show her what she was looking at. So she picked up a stack at random and started sifting through it. She knew to look for a pierced sheet of paper. She'd seen it before. If she could just find the paper.

Then she looked under the leather bound stitched notebooks on the shelf, telling herself that she could absolutely not open them, and behind and in the containers on the lower shelves. Nothing. She went back to the piles of paper again.

After flipping quickly through a few different stacks and trying to smother the feelings of guilt that were creeping across her belly, she reached for another pile on a high shelf. It tipped over, and

sheets of paper fell like leaves all over her, the desk, and the floor.

"Odin's ghost, Hiccup," she said to herself, kneeling to pick up the papers as fast as she could. At least falling paper didn't make any noise, unlike a pile of swords or something. If she was lucky, no one heard anything.

She wasn't paying attention to what was on the papers, because if it wasn't pierced, it wasn't what she was looking for. Then she turned a page over and realized she was looking at herself. Well, pieces of herself. Her braid and her headband, drawn from the back with her face pointed away. Her axe. Her hands, after she threw. Her arms, holding her axe over her head, aiming at a tree sketched faintly in the margin. Her eyes, glaring like she was angry. She looked closer at each tiny sketch, then turned the sheet over.

The next one held pieces of Stoick. His helmet. His mantle. His hands, one fist on the table, his other hand pointing down at a map.

Was this practice? What was he practicing for?

Oh, well, Astrid thought. As tempting as it was to keep looking through each one, she knew she didn't have time. She had to find the needle - or needles - in all these pages.

And she hadn't found anything yet. Just paper. Mountains of paper, all jumbled up and stacked at all angles on the shelves. There was probably enough paper to build a saddle and a dragon out of it, maybe two.

But she kept searching, her mouth twisting with frustration.

No needles.

Her shoulders slumped, and she put the last pile of paper back on the shelf where she'd found it.

She was going to have to ask him.

She didn't want to ask him. But if she couldn't find them, she'd have to. There was no other way to finish her gift.

It would be like warning him the gift was coming, and she preferred to surprise him, preferably by tossing his gifts through the window in his roof onto his bed for him to find later.

But she couldn't finish what she had been working on for weeks now, not without a stronger needle. She'd tried. She'd broken all of hers in the attempt.

She reached the end of a shelf, and found nothing but paper she'd already searched through.

"I guess I have to ask Hiccup," she muttered to herself.

"Ask me what?"

56. Chapter 56: Sitting With Discomfort

Sitting With Discomfort

Astrid jumped back and let out a shriek Hiccup had never in his life heard her make. Battle cries, yes. Yelling and hollering, of course.

But shrieking like someone had dropped her into the icy northern seas? Never.

Hiccup leaned against the doorway, his arms folded, and tried not to laugh. Astrid looked horrified, andâ€¦ well, it was probably a good thing for him she'd left her axe in the other room.

He'd heard someone in the forge, and when he entered quietly - a small miracle given that he was sore and his leg was noisy - he was shocked to see the axe leaning against the table.

He could see the candlelight flickering on the back wall. That light had alerted him when he walked past the forge that someone was there, or that something was left burning that shouldn't have been.

But he did not expect to see Astrid's axe - or Astrid. Usually, if someone snuck into the forge, they were after large weaponry that was otherwise forbidden to them. And usually, Tuffnut was involved.

Hiccup's stomach had clenched when he had stopped in the doorway and saw her reaching up to a high shelf to replace the pile of papers she'd taken down. He kept things he didn't want anyone to see up there. Like sketches that weren't done, or ideas that weren't right but maybe would work one day.

And, he had to admit, his reaction was also because Astrid in candlelight was something he rarely saw, and it stopped him inside. The air had stirred around the candle as she moved through the shelves of paper, and the waves of light moving across her body made her seem almost unreal. A figment.

Astrid had stopped to look at the drawings pinned to the wall above his desk just as he'd been about to let her know he was there. The candlelight shifted over her face as she looked at each one, a soft smile on her face as she leaned closer to try to make out the details. She was so beautiful, it hurt to breathe.

Then she'd tried another shelf, still searching for whatever it was she wanted, and had spoken out loud. He'd answered without thinking - and scared her.

"It's a good thing I don't have my axe," she growled at him, one hand over her chest as if trying to hold in her heart. She looked angry but alsoâ€¦ guilty?

What was she up to?

Hiccup pushed off the doorframe and walked slowly toward her. She stood still and frowned at him. He could tell that she did not like that he'd caught her.

He stood in front of her, and mimicked her posture: arms folded, brows down, chin down, and shoulders pushed forward. Except he was too happy to see her to frown at her, and he couldn't help himself. He smiled.

"What are you looking for, Astrid?"

She dropped her head, looking down at the floor. She sighed audibly.

"I'm sorry for snooping, Hiccup."

"It's ok," he said, unable to keep the grin off his face. She looked so ashamed of herself, he couldn't resist teasing her. "I'm not madâ€|that much."

She looked up, and he tried to look angry, but he couldn't manage it.

He wasn't angry. He was confused, but that was normal for him where Astrid was concerned.

"Can you make me a needle?"

"A needle?" Hiccup scratched the side of his face. That's what she wanted? Had she broken hers? Why was she looking through his shelves?

"Yes. A large one, the kind you'd use to sew a saddle or a larger piece of leather."

He nodded slowly. "I use a few different sizes. Can I give you one of mine?"

"N-no," she said, shaking her head after a moment's thought. "I mean, I would need to keep it for awhile, if that's ok. If you could give me one you don't use, maybe? Or make me one later?"

"Sure," he said, turning back towards the main room of the forge. He heard her follow him, then stop when she saw him put more wood onto the fire.

"Wait, now? You're going to make them now?"

"Sure, why not? Doesn't take long."

Astrid stood in the doorway he'd been leaning in, her eyes wide, twisting her fingers together in front of her waist.

"Are you sure? You don't haveâ€| anywhere you need to be?"

Hiccup smiled at her, but didn't say aloud what he was thinking. His father was off the island until late. His house was empty, and he was too sore, he knew, to fly safely. There wasn't anywhere else he'd rather be, and it wouldn't take long to make her a needle. He pulled a small length of metal out of the scrap box, then another. He needed something thin and strong that he could heat and punch through.

"Can I help?"

"No," he replied, frowning into the scrap pile in front of him, trying to find the piece he was looking for.

Astrid moved away from the doorway and he looked up. "Will you stay and talk to me? Unless you need to go," he added, frowning. He hadn't asked.

"Oh, no. I can't stay. Thank you." She looked so ill at ease, he almost felt guilty. Almost. Opportunities to tease her a little were rare.

Astrid hopped up onto a table against the wall and folded one leg under her, watching him. He found the piece he was looking for, set it aside, and went to get his apron and roll up his sleeves.

"I'm guessing I can't ask you what the needle's for, right?"

"Right," Astrid replied. She bent her leg, resting her foot on the edge of the table and her chin on top of her knee. Her arms wrapped around her bent leg, and she watched him. Closely.

The light in the forge increased as the fire grew, but it was dark outside, so most of the room, including where Astrid was perched, remained in shadows. She could probably see him more clearly than he could see her. He could feel her watching him. Maybe asking her to stay wasn't a good idea. He'd set fire to himself if he wasn't paying attention.

"So?" Astrid still seemed uncomfortable.

"So what?" He grinned at her over his shoulder as he lined up the tools he'd need and set a bucket of water nearby.

She sighed and shifted her position on the table, dropping her leg, then lifting it again and wrapping her arms across her knee. She didn't want silence. He could tell. He decided to take pity on her.

"How about this: I'll make needles, you tell me about your day."

"My day?"

"Sure."

"Um. I flew, had lunch, went to the academy, watched Ruffnut try to kill you, went to Mornen's, had dinner, then came here."

He looked at her, eyebrows raised, chin down.

"I'm sorry," Astrid said, lowering her leg again and swinging it back and forth. Her hands were twisting in front of her. "I'm really not good at talking when there's something I don't want to talk about in the way."

"And the reason for the needles would be the thing you don't want to talk about?"

Astrid nodded. Then her expression brightened. "Can I ask you questions?"

Hiccup shrugged, then nodded. He used the bellows to increase the fire, then added more wood as the flames grew.

"How was your day?"

Hiccup glanced at her, tempted to answer as briefly as she had, but the look on her face changed his mind. Her mouth was pinched, her fingers were still restless, and she kept shifting her legs under her, like she couldn't get comfortable. She looked miserable.

"Not bad. More forge than flying after this morning, but some is better than none, even with explosions."

Hiccup rolled his sleeves again and put on gloves. It would be easier if he took off his shirt, but he couldn't. Not with Astrid there.

He began heating the narrow strip of metal he'd chosen. The midpoint went into the fire directly, touching the burning wood and embers, and he waited for it to begin to glow as it absorbed the heat around it. The height of the fire increased slowly, and he moved the metal deeper into the center.

Almost time.

57. Chapter 57: Remembering Questions

Remembering Questions

Astrid watched the firelight move over Hiccup. Not that she had much of a choice. She told herself it was because he was the only thing to look at in the room, but really, she couldn't look away.

She'd never spent a lot of time with him in the forge, but he looked like he did when he was at the academy. He carried himself the same way, like he knew what the next step was, and the step after that. He was content. And confident. He didn't look away, or down at the ground, wary or unsure. He fit into the forge as he fit into the academy.

It was surprising for Astrid, seeing him in another place where he clearly felt like he belonged, where the ease he felt made him stand up straighter. It didn't seem like he thought there were many places like that.

The thought made her frown.

Didn't he know there were so many places in Berk where he fit? Where he belonged? Where, if he wasn't there, people instinctively looked for him, herself included?

Hiccup moved to a nearby table to take a hammer from the wall.

He was moving slowly. Like he was still sore. She felt the burn of guilt again, that he was making needles for her after he caught her snooping through his shelves. She felt horrible. Going behind someone's back was never her first choice, or third or fourth, to achieve what she wanted.

She shouldn't have done it. She should have just asked him. He wouldn't have said no. And if she'd told him not to ask her why she was looking for needles, he wouldn't have.

Her eyes narrowed. He seemed to be keeping most of his weight off his left leg. Was he hurting?

She felt even worse.

Perhaps he'd been more hurt than he let on when the gas had exploded so close to him. It had scared her, seeing him nearly fly off Toothless. She'd wanted to kill Snotlout for being so stupid. Even Ruffnut had felt badly, and she tried to kill her brother on a twice-daily basis. Nothing made her feel guilty.

Then Astrid remembered the questions she'd wanted to ask him, so many weeks ago, when they sat on the rock warmed by the hidden springs. Now that things wereâ€|different, could she ask? Would he answer?

She looked down at her foot, swinging back and forth beneath the table she sat on. Of course, he would answer. He shared anything she asked of him. The real question was whether she could she ask him?

Why was she scared to ask him questions about himself? Was she afraid to know the answers? She wanted to hit herself with her axe, but she looked around. She'd left it on the other side of the room. Easier to just ask.

"Does it hurt?" She forced the words past her throat where they threatened to stick.

"Does what hurt?" Hiccup was frowning at the fire, waiting for the metal inside.

"Your leg."

He looked up at her, brows together, eyes widened.

Astrid would not allow herself to look away. She gazed back at him, propping her chin again on her bent knee.

"Sometimes," he said.

"Sometimes?"

Did that mean it hurt now?

He frowned at her. He didn't look upset, though. Justâ€|confused.

"Yes, sometimes," he said, shifting in place. "If I run too much, or stand without moving for too long. Or if it's cold and wet out, it'll ache."

Astrid nodded.

"Gobber says the same thing happens to him, too. I guess it's normal."

"Do you remember it?"

"My leg?" Now he was starting to look at her like he was worried she was ill. She felt ill. Maybe she'd gone mad.

"No, do you remember the battle?"

Hiccup glanced up at her, rolling his sleeves up higher on his arms. Then he pulled the hot metal out of the fire with a pair of tongs. The middle was glowing orange, and he began striking it with a hammer. He pulled it so it grew thinner, then struck it again. The piece wasn't more than two hands long, but it was becoming longer as Hiccup worked with the softened metal.

It was a moment before he answered her, and he didn't look at her when he spoke.

"I remember parts of it, before I got knocked out." His head tilted to the side, and his eyes narrowed. She wasn't sure if he was focusing on the metal in his hands, or the memory she'd asked him about.

"I remember flying through the spines, the tail coming towards me, but... I don't remember anything after that."

Astrid nodded.

"Sometimes," he said, then paused. He swallowed, then took a breath. "Sometimes I dream about it, when Toothless' tail didn't work, when we couldn't get out of the way."

"Does your dream end differently?"

Hiccup shrugged with one shoulder and glanced up at her. "I wake up," he said. "Instead of being knocked out."

Astrid didn't respond. She was watching his arms as the metal grew thinner.

"Why are you asking?"

She shrugged. She could make up an answer, or deflect his question as curiosity. But she couldn't bring herself to lie to him, not when he refused to ever lie to her.

"I wondered. I've always wondered but..." Astrid swallowed, her mouth dry. "I didn't know if I could ask."

Hiccup glanced up at her again, his attention focused mostly on the glowing metal in front of him. "You can always ask," he said softly.

Astrid nodded, then hopped off the table to move close and watch him work.

There was something Hiccup was curious about.

"What happened after?"

Astrid had moved around the fire and stood behind him, watching over his shoulder as he crafted the needle, shaping it so it was thinner, then inspecting it for deviations and flaws.

"After what?"

"After I landed. I know Toothless had me, " he said, shifting his metal leg beneath him, almost gesturing with it. "And I know he hurt his wing when he hit the ground."

"Stoick picked you up."

Hiccup glanced at her. He'd never heard her call his father by his name.

"I know," he replied.

"He thought you were dead."

Astrid coughed, then cleared her throat. Then she continued.

"We all did. You were so pale, and you weren't moving at all. I ran through the crowd and he pushed your hair back and I thoughtâ€|."

She trailed off. He nudged her with his elbow.

She nudged him back, but softly. He was holding burning metal.

"You flew me back," he said. It wasn't a question.

"Yeah. There weren't any ships left near the beach, not worth sailing, anyway. So Gobber took you, and climbed onto Stormfly behind me."

"I didn't know that," he said, looking over at her a moment.

"Yeah. He pushed your dad, too. Said he knew what to do better than anyone, and if Stoick didn't want you to die on the way back to Berk, he'd get out of the way."

"He said that? To my dad?"

"Yeah, in front of everyone, too. Then he demanded your dad's pelt to wrap you in. Stoick handed it over without a word. It wasâ€| impressive."

Hiccup couldn't picture that conversation at all, no matter how he tried. He shook his head.

"Gobber tied off your leg with something, and it had to have hurt, but you didn't even flinch."

"Glad I missed that part." Hiccup inspected the length of the needle in front of him, and began tapping the end with a hammer to flatten

it out. He examined it closely, then checked the width on each side. A few more taps, and then it would be time to drop it into the water bucket, which was on the table next to Astrid.

She was leaning against the edge, her hands tucked under her arms. Her shoulders were curved inward, and her gaze was on the fire pit, but it didn't look like she was actually seeing it.

The water hissed when he dropped the needle into it, and he took off his gloves once the steam subsided. Then he stepped in front of Astrid and caught her attention.

"Hey." He didn't know what else to say but he didn't want her to have that look of abandonment on her face. Astrid's expression went from sad to irritated.

"I really don't like thinking you're dead, Hiccup," she said. Despite the anger she tried to show on her face, her voice was soft and uneven.

"That happens a lot?"

"Often enough," she said. "Stop it."

"I'll try."

â€|

Hiccup nudged the metal in the bucket next to her, then lifted it out with his hand.

"Time to sharpen the end. I have to use the stone for a bit, so it'll be noisy. Sorry."

Astrid shrugged, watching Hiccup cross the room. He started the stone moving with the pedal beneath it, then picked up a different pair of gloves on a nearby table.

"Were you scared?" The words flew out before she could stop them, and she wanted to clap her hands over her mouth and run. Except that Hiccup stepped back, a thoughtful look on his face, and let the stone in front of him slow its rotation.

"Scared?"

"After. Or during."

His eyebrows were down across his eyes, a look he wore when he was trying to figure something out and hadn't identified the solution yet. "Of course I was."

She didn't know what to say. He put the metal down on the table and took off his gloves after he stopped the stone with one hand. The muscles in his arm flexed with the effort, and Astrid shifted in place, her back still leaning against the table.

Then he crossed the room to stand in front of her, closer than she expected. He put his hands on her upper arms, which were still folded across her middle. She realized how tense she was when the sensation of his skin on hers made her gasp slightly.

"Astrid, what's wrong? Why are you asking?"

She opened her mouth, looking up at his eyes, but no sound came out. She didn't know why she was asking. She just wanted to know.

"Of course I was scared," he said. "During and after and lots of times after that." He seemed so puzzled. It was obvious to Hiccup, she supposed. Of course he was scared, and of course he was aware of it, and of course he was able to say so.

"Are you scared? Were you?" He asked her softly, his hands still on her upper arms, fingers softly following the curve of her skin.

"Me?"

He nodded.

"Iâ€| yeah." She looked down, feeling her face catch fire. "I thought you were going to die. When we flew back. I wasâ€|." Astrid stopped talking, looking into the fire pit. Then she looked up at Hiccup. If he could say it, so could she.

"I was scared we wouldn't make it back to Berk fast enough, that you'd die or that Gobber would lose his grip on you or on me. I hadn't flown on Stormfly by myself for more than a few minutes, and we had no saddle and I kept looking for a ship, any ship that might have been safer, but there weren't any. So we kept flying."

She took a breath and closed her eyes, looking down at the ground again. His hands still held her arms gently.

"Gothi and Mornen were already in the square when we landed. I never asked how they knew to be there. They just knew. They took you and I followed and you still weren't moving, andâ€|." Her throat closed on a sob, and she stopped talking.

Hiccup, gentle and generous, folded his arms around her and she leaned her forehead against his shoulder.

"I didn't die. Still here."

She nodded.

"You can punch me if you want to make sure," he added. She laughed, a short breath that began as a sob but ended far from pain.

59. Chapter 59: Explosions and Fear

****Explosions and Fear****

Astrid took a deep breath, looking down at Hiccup's apron, his shirt beneath it, the gleam of his metal leg when he shifted his weight.

"I'm scared right now," she whispered.

"Yeah? Why?" Hiccup spoke softly into her ear, his head close to

hers. She shut her eyes, wishing she could maybe also not hear herself say any of this.

"I'm scared becauseâ€¦ I don't know why."

She felt him move his hand across her back and lift her braid to the side so he wouldn't pull her hair.

"Don't tell me you're scared of me," he said.

Astrid pulled back, about to scoff at the idea, and froze.

She felt like the metal plunged into the bucket of water, shocked into cold relief.

That was it.

"I am scared of you," she said. "I'm... very scared of you."

"Why?" He looked so confused. Hurt, even. But the realization was so sharp and fresh, she didn't have the words to explain herself clearly, or fast enough to take that look from his face. And then, her temper was taking over, she erupted.

"I'm not scared of you, like you're going to hurt me," she said.

"But youâ€¦." She gasped a breath. "You're my weakness."

Hiccup's eyes widened, and his cheeks went pale. He stepped back as if she'd hit him. She grabbed his arms, holding tight and not letting him pull away as she spoke.

"I don't like it! I don't like having a weakness. I don't like having a weakness that I can't control... I don't like that at all. You nearly fell off Toothless today and I was terrified. I nearly killed Snotlout, I was so angry at him. I don't like that."

Astrid felt him trying to move away and wouldn't let him. "No, wait. Don'tâ€¦I'm saying this all wrong."

She was going to keep him in front of her. Her hands wrapped tighter around his arms and held on. He wasn't going to move. She looked around, trying to gather words together in the right order when she wanted to just scream.

"I like having... you."

Hiccup stilled.

"I like having you with me. Butâ€¦ I used to be able to push aside anything, any feeling, and notâ€¦ feel it anymore. I couldn't with Mornen. And I can't with you. I can't push you aside and I can't stop myself from â€¦ everything and I hate that I can't control it. I hate knowing that the way I feel isâ€¦."

She sighed, her right hand letting go of his arm, making a fist instinctively, though she wasn't going to hit anything. She rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand.

"It doesn't make me _weak_. I feel stronger with you."

She looked up at Hiccup, at his eyes, green and peaceful, though his face was wary and hurt.

"If something happened to you, Iâ€¦ I fear that most of all. That's my weakness. Youâ€¦ get to me. I think of the battle and flying home with you and today andâ€¦ that fearâ€¦ sneaks up on me. I can handle it most of the time, but sometimes it's tooâ€¦big. It's too much and it scares me."

She moved closer to him but released his arm. He was free to turn away or move back. But he didn't.

He gathered her in his arms again, slowly, with cautious movements. He didn't speak until the tension left her body. She rested her head on his shoulder again, her eyes closed tight. The burn of humiliation spread through her, and she didn't want to look up, not for the next ten or twenty years.

"I understand," he said in a voice just above a whisper.

"Really?" She didn't move. She was too surprised and too exhausted to move.

"You stand up and toss axes off Stormfly without a harness on. All the time."

She sniffed. She wasn't crying.

"Would I ever hold you back from a battle? Never. Am I scared that something will happen to you? Always."

He took a breath, then another, before he spoke again.

"But I also know you, and... there's nothing you can't handle, can't knock down or destroy if you have to."

Astrid nodded, her eyes still pressed shut.

"I don't know how to make you feel less afraid, though. I mean, I may not have your way with an axe, but I am not defenseless."

"I know," she sniffled and laughed suddenly. "I used to think you were impossible to kill."

"You tried to kill me?" Hiccup stepped back, his half grin mixing with wariness.

"No." She laughed, looking up at him. "Sometimes I wanted to, but only for a second. But, all the time, you fall and you're ok. You get bruises but never break any bones. You've crashed on Toothless so many times, but you get up. You're faster than most of us on one leg, even."

Hiccup shrugged. "I have to be sometimes."

Astrid reached forward and pulled Hiccup toward her with enough strength that he nearly crashed into her. And she felt him flinch, hard.

"Wait a minute," she said, looking at his face. His mouth was pinched, his lips pale.

"Show me."

"Beg pardon?"

"You're hurt. I can tell you're hurt. You hurt your leg. Show me. Now. Show me what happened."

"Bossy, much?" But he stepped back and rolled up his pant leg slowly and did as she asked.

There was bruising, deep and angry, all around his lower leg where the straps had held tight as he was pushed away by the explosion. He'd loosened the straps, but the skin underneath was streaked with red and purple. Astrid sucked in a breath.

"Show me your side."

"Astrid-"

"Now, Hiccup. Please."

He sighed, then lifted his shirt beneath his apron. More bruising where the lines of his harness had pressed across his ribs.

"It looks worse than it is."

"I was just thinking it must feel worse than it looks. Those are some deep bruises."

She moved around his leg, looking at the back. Then she lifted his shirt higher and touched the skin above the dark red lines on his ribs, feeling how swollen he was.

"Are you sure nothing's broken?"

"I can stand on it, though I have to shift around a lot. Nothing's broken. Just sore."

"What about the bones in your chest?"

"I can breathe fine. It doesn't hurt. It's just sort of a constant soreness."

She looked at him, awestruck, then furious.

"What?"

She punched him, hard as she could, in the arm.

"Ow! What the - am I not injured enough here?"

"You're standing up, moving around the forge, making something completely not urgent, and you're hurting? What is WRONG with you?"

He looked at her, confused. He stepped back, rubbing his arm.

"You do not need to be... in pain making something for me."

"Astrid, I told you, it's not a big deal."

"It IS a big deal, Hiccup! You're hurt!"

He started to get angry. "Yes, but I'm not dead. So it hurts. It does, sometimes more than other times, but I'm fine."

"You are not fine."

"Hey." He stood closer to her, glaring. "That's my call to make."

She stood still, not backing away, even though she could see he was really angry with her now. Inside she was a maelstrom of fury and fear, and she didn't know how to tell him except hitting him again, whichâ€|no.

' 'Hiccup, you can't-

"Don't tell me I can't do something, Astrid," he said in a voice that was quiet and cold.

She felt like she was going to explode. "Thor damn it, Hiccup. You don't understand!"

"Understand _what_?"

"I can't notâ€| _you_!"

He stepped back. Maybe she could have said that better. She cursed herself, then did it again, looking down at the floor.

She felt his fingertips on her chin, lifting her face to his. He'd moved closer to her, so when she looked up at him, his face was a breath from hers. She clenched her jaw, willing herself not to cry.

"I can't not you, either."

60. Chapter 60: Finishing Things

****Finishing Things****

Astrid closed her eyes and felt tears sliding down her cheeks. Thor damn it, again.

"I'm sorry," she said, making herself look at him. He wiped the moisture from her face with the back of his wrist, gently.

"For what?"

"I'm sorry you're hurt and I asked you to do something for-

"I volunteered. If I couldn't do it, I wouldn't have."

She shook her head.

Then she reached up between them, tentatively. He didn't move. She put her hands on his sides, then moved closer to hug him properly.

"I'm sorry," she said again, still watching his face.

"You already said that."

"No. Iâ€¦ I hurt you."

"You punch me all the time."

"No, earlier, I hurt you with what I said. I'm sorry I didn't explain better."

He shrugged with one shoulder, dismissing hurt so easily. How did he do that?

"I'd rather know what's bothering you. Even if it doesn't all make sense to me," he said.

She glared at him.

"I'm going to finish your needle. Can you try not to kill me in the next few minutes?"

She glared at him some more, but he laughed and leaned in, kissed her cheek.

"You think you are so funny," she said, scowling

"I know I'm so funny. You're trying not to laugh."

Astrid gave up, allowed herself to smile - not laugh - and hopped back up onto the table. Hiccup crossed the room, slowly but smoothly as she watched, and picked up the needle in progress from the table. He picked up a hammer, and placed the needle beneath a clamp to hold it in place. Then he punched a hole in the top, and inspected it carefully. She could see his lips moving. He was muttering to himself, and it made her smile again. Then he started the stone.

He only sharpened it for a few minutes, but he was right. It was loud.

The stone came to a slow stop as he used a smaller tool to hone the point of the needle, which was beginning to gleam.

"How did everyone get back to Berk?" He was focused on the needle, but looked up at her with a frown. "The boats were destroyed, right?"

"No one told you this part?"

"No. I never askedâ€¦until now." He froze. "But if you don't want to talk about it, it's no big deal."

"You can ask," she said, echoing his words back to him.

"So?"

"Well, from what Fishlegs and the twins told me, Stoick watched us, and then announced that he'd fly back to Berk and send whatever ships were still in the harbor to bring everyone home. But none of our dragons would take him. They wouldn't go near him, and if he approached them, they backed away and flew over his head. He wasâ€¦ not happy."

Hiccup was pressing his lips together. She could tell he was trying not to smile.

"Poor Dad," he finally said.

"Yeah, it wasâ€¦. He was really worried about you, and trying not to show it, andâ€¦ really angry that the dragons wouldn't go near him. Then Toothless walked over to him and butted him with his head."

"Toothless?"

"Yeah. But he couldn't fly."

Hiccup nodded quickly. "His tail was gone. Burned off."

"You knew that?"

He nodded again, glancing up at her, then down. "Caught fire while we were in midair."

Astrid stared at him. Odin's beard, she thought. People said she was fearless.

"Go on," he said, not looking up from sharpening and polishing the needle in his hand.

"Somehow, Toothless convinced Meatlug to approach you, and Fishlegs placed your dad's hand on Meatlug's nose."

"Wow," he said.

"Fishlegs flew home with your father behind him. Ruff said Fishlegs never looked so ill in his life."

Hiccup chuckled. He'd stopped working, and was watching her.

"It gets better. Snotlout and the twins flew back with them, but Snidelout tried to insist that he should ride Hookfang, too. Hookfang was not interested in going anywhere near Snidelout, so he flew away."

"Oh, no," Hiccup started to laugh.

Astrid was holding back laughter, too. "Ruff told me he made it seem like Hookfang was the one flying away, but she overheard Snotlout whisper something right before they took off."

That made Hiccup laugh harder. "Oh, gods," he said, holding his side.

She sat up suddenly, then jumped down and ran to the door.

"I'll be right back," she said.

And she was - she ran to the great hall and back, returning within a few minutes. Hiccup had sharpened the needle until it all shone in the firelight, and was inspecting it closely when she came back to the forge holding a steaming mug.

"What's that?"

Did he sound wary?

"Tea, with herbs for pain," she replied.

Then she took a sip. "See? Perfectly safe. You asked me not to, so I'm not trying to kill you."

He laughed loudly again, then grabbed his side. "Ouch."

"Here," she said, coming over to him. She held the mug to his lips, and dared him with one raised eyebrow to decline.

He covered her hand with his and drank.

"Not horrible," he said, taking the mug from her. Then he reached for her before she could move away.

"Give me your hand," he said.

Her heart stuttered in her chest and she wanted to punch it for being ridiculous. She lifted her hand up, fingers open. Gently, he placed the needle in her palm.

She picked it up immediately and inspected it closely.

"Oh, this isâ€¦ this is amazing." She tapped her finger on the point and jerked her hand away.

"And sharp, yes," he said, taking another sip of tea after shaking his head at her. "You just watched me sharpen it and yet you test it?"

"Always test your weapons," she replied, not even looking at him.

"Weapons, right." He started to clean up, replacing the tools he'd used with one hand, still drinking his tea. Astrid rolled the needle between her fingers, feeling how smooth and balanced it was. Strong, but thin enough and deadly sharp. It was perfect. Exactly what she needed. And she had extra motivation to finish her gift, too.

She looked up as Hiccup put the mug down with a low curse. He was reaching behind him, trying to untie his apron, which was knotted behind his back. She dropped the needle in the bag attached to her belt, crossed the room and stood behind him.

"I got it," she said softly, brushing his hands away.

"Are you going to stab me?" He looked over his shoulder at her,

grinning.

"If you're lucky, I won't," she replied. She undid the knot, but held the strings taut in her hands. Then she stepped closer, pulling on the strings so he moved back against her. His hands reached behind him to find hers. She kissed the back of his neck, and then whispered in his ear.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," he replied, his voice rougher than it had been before.

She didn't let go of the ties in her hand.

61. Chapter 61: Spinning in Circles Inside

****Spinning in Circles Inside****

"You need me to make something else?" She could hear the frown in his voice, and she smiled, behind his back. His apron was giving her ideas.

"Nope," she said, letting him go. He lifted the apron over his head and turned to face her, holding the folded leather over his arms in front of him. He looked at her, very confused. She smiled, a grin that she knew would tell him she was up to something.

Then she stepped forward, put her hands on his upper arms, and kissed him.

He tossed his apron toward the table and didn't let her pull away. His hand moved behind her head, beneath her braid, to hold her close to him. He angled his head slightly and deepened their kiss in a way that made her feel like she was spinning in circles, and she had to hang on to him with both hands to keep herself from falling.

She felt him shift position, moving his weight away from his left side, and pulled back quickly. He frowned.

"On the table. You. Now," she said. He blinked at her.

"I mean it," she said.

He kept his eyes on her, but turned his back to the table, and, using his arms, lifted himself easily onto its surface. She moved to stand between his knees, reached up, and pulled his mouth down to hers.

But it wasn't the same. The table was higher than others, meant as a standing work surface, and he was a little too far above her. She couldn't reach him, not with the same pressure and intensity as when he'd been standing.

"Wait," she said, moving away from him a fraction.

"What now?" He smiled at her.

"Move back a bit," she said. He complied, and she jumped up onto the

table, sitting astride his lap, her knees alongside his hips.

She slid her fingers back into his hair, tilted his head back and kissed him again, as deeply as he had been kissing her moments before. Perfect.

He reached up and placed his hands on her waist, then moved one hand to her jaw, holding her head gently but bringing her closer to him.

Astrid felt like she'd been tossed into the forge fire pit. In an instant, every part of her was aflame. She opened her mouth just as he did, and the change in sensation made her want more, more of him, more of his touch, more of everything. She was still resting her weight on her knees, but his hand moved on her waist, pulling her down closer to him.

Then he stopped suddenly, pulling back and pushing against her with his hand.

"What now?" She asked with a slight grin on her face, her breathing fast.

His breathing wasn't any slower than hers. He looked dazed and had to shake his head briefly before he spoke.

"Your skirt - it - I - injuries - sorry," he said, between breaths.

She looked down at the spikes on her skirt and started to laugh. "Forgot about those."

She moved sideways and sat down next to him on the table. Hiccup put his hands in his hair, curling his body inward slightly as he tried to catch his breath. She leaned toward him and put her chin on his shoulder.

"Hey," she said softly.

He dropped his hands into his lap and looked at her, still breathing like he'd just run across the sea. She moved forward and kissed him, placing her hand on his face. This time, it wasn't as fiery, though it was just as potent. They kissed as their breathing slowed, and he reached up and covered her hand with his, bringing it to his heart. She opened her hand flat against his chest, and his fingers gently moved over hers, sending fire and lightning up her arm, matching the thunder she could feel beneath her palm.

He pulled away slightly and rested his forehead against hers, looking into her eyes. She smiled at him. "Can I walk you home?"

"Sure. But you can't come in. Dad's out until late, andâ€¦|."

"I know," she said.

He frowned. "Do you?"

"Of course," she replied.

"You know if it were... up to me-"

"If it were up to youâ€¦what?" Astrid watched the flush spread across his face in seconds, then laughed softly.

Her own face was burning, too.

"I know I don't need to protect you," he said, slowly. "But I won't risk you, either, or risk anyone saying anything stupid about you."

"I know," she repeated. "I'm kissing you goodnight here, ok?"

"Ohâ€¦ok?"

She leaned into him. She intended it to be the last time she kissed him that evening, but she couldn't bring herself to stop.

Then a noise, someone dropping firewood on the plaza outside, made them freeze and move apart, looking at the doorway of the forge behind them. It was dark and there didn't seem to be anyone there, but it was as clear a signal as any. Time to go.

He spread the embers of the fire he'd built while she blew out the candle in his work room.

She walked with him slowly up the hill toward his house, knowing it hurt him to climb. He didn't stop or give any outward sign that walking bothered him, but she could see in the way he pressed his lips together slightly that it wasn't easy.

The moon was low in the sky, and people were walking to and from Meade Hall, greeting them both. No one looked surprised to see them together, but Hiccup kept glancing at her as he walked, a look of concern on his face.

"What?" She finally asked.

"Nothing," he replied, shaking his head and looking down at the ground in front of him.

They walked together, and then, too soon, his door was in front of them. She took his hand, and he looked down at her fingers twined through his, then up at her face. His eye were wide, like he was surprised she was there.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "About earlier."

"Which part?"

"The part I should be sorry about, Hiccup," she said, glaring at him, though she knew the effect was ruined by the fact that she couldn't extend the glare past her mouth, which was determined to smile.

"Which part was was that?" Teasing her brought him far too much enjoyment, she thought to herself.

"Thank you for the needle," she said, ignoring his question. She squeezed his hand in hers, and felt his fingers tighten to hold on to

her, not letting go.

"Any time," he replied in a soft voice. Then he released her hand, and turned to lean against the doorpost of his home, crossing his arms over his chest, his left leg bent, resting over his right.

She turned, but then looked back with a frown.

"Aren't you going inside?"

"Not yet," he said. She shrugged, and walked down the hill, following the path toward her home.

When she looked over her shoulder before she moved out of sight, Hiccup was still there. Toothless had landed next to Hiccup, and he was rubbing Toothless' head and talking to him.

Astrid stood still, watching. Was he going to patrol without her? He'd said -

Then she saw Hiccup shake his head. Toothless sniffed Hiccup's leg and butted his head against Hiccup's side, making him laugh.

Then he turned his head quickly to see if she'd gone.

She stood for a long moment with her hand on a neighbor's house, looking them over her shoulder.

He waved. She smiled and waved back, then slipped into the shadows, out of his sight.

62. Chapter 62: Watching the Sun

****Watching the Sun****

Hiccup didn't see much of Astrid the following day, or the day after that. He'd gone to collect the packets of water and Zippleback gas from the academy, but they were already gone. And he presumed, due to the lack of explosions elsewhere on Berk, that she'd been the one to take them.

He walked up the cliffs from the academy, and saw his father go into the great hall. His father had returned from a meeting with the tribes far west of Berk as expected, but Hiccup hadn't spoken much to his father, either.

It was a little strange. He was surrounded by the noise of people, but few of them were talking to him.

He walked up to his house, prepared to go to his room for a bit, but stopped when he got inside the door.

He didn't want to be alone.

He didn't need to. That feeling of needing silence to combat the exhaustion of people and requests and talking and arguing, it wasn't there.

He picked up the plate of food he'd set out for himself that morning,

but sat on the front steps of his house to eat. He didn't want to be inside.

The sun was beginning to move toward the horizon, and the air was warmer. His leg felt better, he thought, as he stretched his prosthetic out in front of him. It didn't hurt, in part because his bruises were healing, and because he'd gotten better at fitting the prosthetic to his leg and adjusting when it was sore or swollen.

Hiccup finished his snack, put the plate aside, and pulled his notebook out of his pocket. Twisting the pencil through his fingers, he looked backwards through the drawings he'd done.

He'd sketched a new fire prevention system for the buildings near the stables, but didn't know if it would work, if the roof beams that were already in place could support additional structures plus a large bucket full of water. He had to ask Gobber. Gobber would definitely know.

He looked up, glancing at the forge. He hadn't seen Gobber in a few days either. That was very strange. Was he ill?

Hiccup turned the page in his notebook, then looked around again to make sure no one was nearby.

On the paper was Astrid's smile. The slightly crooked one from right before she'd kissed him the other night. He was trying to draw it, but it was impossible. It never looked right, and, well, he had to admit just a smile on the page was a little creepy, too.

He turned to a blank page and tipped his head back against the wood post behind him, looking up at the clouds.

Nice evening for flying. Maybe he and the others could fly out together, practice maneuvers and find an island to cook their dinner. His dad had just been to the west, but a long patrol to the north or east wouldn't be a bad idea.

He needed to think of a gift for his dad, too. His birthday was soon. Usually the village celebrated with him, and there was always a huge party with food and music, but Hiccup wanted to give his father something this year. He wasn't sure of what, and he sketched random ideas on the blank page before him. A scabbard, maybe. Or a new knife.

He drew different weapons, scratched them out, and tried again. He couldn't think of anything.

So he looked out over the houses, turned a page, and started sketching Berk in his notebook. He was drawing the cliffs and islands to the west when he saw his father approaching.

"Hiccup," his father said by way of greeting.

Hiccup paused.

Was that going to turn into a "There's a problem, Hiccup," or a "Good evening, Hiccup," or - oh, gods - a "We need to Have a Talk, Hiccup?"

His father wasn't in front of a fire, so if he needed to Have a Talk, he'd probably wait until later. He didn't like to discuss serious things without open flames and a poker in his hand.

Hiccup marked his place in his notebook with his pencil and shut the cover.

His father was walking slowly toward the door, as if he were tired. When he reached their front steps, he turned, and sat down next to Hiccup.

That wasâ€¦ different. He didn't say anything, and neither did his father. The sun continued to move slowly toward the horizon, and the spaces between the houses in front of them began to fill with the golden light of late afternoon.

"It's been a long time since I sat and watched the sun," Stoick murmured.

Hiccup looked up at him.

"Usually, the moment I sit down, someone sees me, and I'm off on another task."

"Been busy?"

Stoick glanced at him. "When are we not busy?"

Hiccup nodded, a wry smile on his face. It was true. They'd both had more to do that spring, between additional responsibilities and repairing the village after winter, plus Hiccup's usual amount of dragon training and riding.

Hiccup realized he didn't mind so much. Last year, the endless things to do each day had left him exhausted by sunset, and he'd only thought of flying off on Toothless for hours with no destination.

Now, he realized, he didn't want to fly away. He wanted to fly, but for a reason - and he wanted to bring people with him.

That was new.

Stoick sighed. He was looking over the rooftops, eyes narrowed, following the line of each one, checking for weakness now that the snows had all melted away. Always watching over Berk in one way or another, Hiccup thought.

"There's a few shingles loose on our roof," Hiccup said.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, Toothless is very insistent about flying early, and says so with his tail," he replied. "I noticed a bit ago."

"Well, have to fix that," Stoick said, but he didn't move get up.

"I can do it," Hiccup said, surprising himself. His dad's eyes

widened. Apparently he was surprised, too.

Stoick frowned, and glanced at Hiccup's leg. But he didn't mention it.

"Gobber should have the tools," was all he said.

"Howâ€¦ how was your visit with the western tribes?"

"Mostly uneventful," Stoick replied. He folded his hands over his middle and leaned back against the other wood beam holding up their door, across from Hiccup, watching the sun as he spoke.

"Treaty was the same as usual, though, at the endâ€¦."

Hiccup looked over at his father. Stoick was still looking at the sky, but his expression had changed. His brows were lower, and he was pulling at his beard with one hand. That wasn't good.

"Though?"

"I had an offer of marriage."

63. Chapter 63: Sensible Proposals

****Sensible Proposals****

Hiccup jerked back and nearly fell off the edge of the stair he was sitting on. "Marriage?"

"Aye."

"Who?"

"The chieftain of the Skjolsung tribe. His daughter."

Hiccup swallowed. A marriage offer. That wasâ€¦ huge. His dad had never remarried, even after everyone in the village, and then Hiccup and Stoick himself, had begun to speak of Hiccup's mother as someone who had died. He tried not to stare at his father, but he couldn't keep the shock off his face. That wasâ€¦ wow.

"I met her. She's attractive, smart." Then Stoick smiled briefly, a gentle crease of fondness that came and went in an instant. "Good cook, too."

Hiccup sat back, and tried to act relaxed. He'd never seen his father with anyone, not that some of the women in the village didn't try to attract his attention. He was the chief, after all. But Hiccup suspected, after overhearing a conversation between his father and Gobber one night long ago, that Stoick privately considered himself still married, because he didn't know with absolute certainty that his wife was dead.

Hiccup frowned.

If his dad was getting married again, things would be very different in Berk. Aligning the two tribes would be intricate, given the distance, though it wouldn't be so far if they flew instead of

sailing ships west each spring. It would mean more room for the dragons, too, and eventually more riders to train.

He looked up, and found Stoick frowning at him.

Hiccup took a breath. "What are you going to do?"

"Depends on your answer."

"My answer?"

"Aye."

Hiccup was lost. "What do I have to do with it?"

"Hiccup. The proposal was for you."

"What?" Now he really was going to fall off the stairs. He reached down and held on to the stone beside him. All of Berk was spinning beneath it. "Me?"

"Aye," Stoick said, starting to laugh. "What, did you think he wanted his daughter to marry me?"

"Well, yeah. You're the chief."

Stoick kept laughing, which started to annoy Hiccup. He looked down. Nothing about this was funny.

"True. But I'll no' marry again."

The way he said it made Hiccup look up from the ground, which wasn't moving though it still felt like it was. His father's expression wasn't sad. It wasâ€¦ curious. Oh, no.

"The proposal was generous, too."

"Isn't itâ€¦ usually the other way around?"

"Aye, but between chieftains, aligning clans, there'sâ€¦ flexibility."

Hiccup felt his insides go cold as his face grew hot. This wasâ€¦ not good. He suddenly did want to fly away on Toothless. Fly off and never come back. He could leave immediately. He looked across the cliffs and thought he saw Toothless near the stables. Could he outrun his dad?

Then he looked back at his father. "Whatâ€¦?"

He didn't know what to ask first. What had his father said? What did this mean? Did he have to agree? What aboutâ€¦?

"Why?" The word flew out of his mouth.

"_Why_?" Stoick started to laugh again but stopped when he saw Hiccup look down at the ground and glare. He covered his mouth with one hand, and Hiccup suspected it was because he was still trying not to smile. "Be serious, son. You brought peace to Berk, after three hundred years of war with the dragons. We're among the most revered

tribes in the northern islands because we ride dragons. Because of you."

Hiccup still looked at the ground, unable to look at his father's face. He hadn't felt this panicked, choking feeling in a long time, but it was back, swallowing him whole. He felt like he was 14 years old again, in a council meeting among elders who towered over him, scowling and glaring at his latest failure.

If he said no, was it failure?

"You should not be surprised a chieftain offered you marriage to align their tribe with ours. You should be surprised it hadn't happened before."

"But you, you didn'tâ€|Mom wasâ€|."

"You're right. My marriage was not an alliance between tribes. But I knew your mother and I would be married before I became chieftain."

Hiccup shook his head. His father was still speaking, outlining parts of the offer from the other chieftain. Land. Farmland, specifically. Livestock. Other words that should have made sense but didn't.

"It's a generous proposal, and perfectly sensible," Stoick finished.

Hiccup couldn't speak. Fear and helplessness clung to his throat like ice on the cliffs.

He shut his eyes. He hated disappointing his father. _Hated _it. And he knew he was about to.

He looked up at Stoick.

"What did you say to him?"

Stoick tilted his head a fraction. "Doesn't matter what I said. Question is, what do you say?"

Hiccup swallowed, but didn't drop his gaze.

"It's a generous offer," he said.

Stoick was still for a long moment before answering.

"Aye. It is."

"And I knowâ€| we've talked about farmland, how having more would beâ€| good for us," Hiccup added slowly. Stoick nodded.

Then as Hiccup tried to figure out how to give his answer, Stoick leaned forward.

In a voice Hiccup hadn't heard him use before, his father said, "Either way, your choice now means a decision is made."

That warning made it easier. The ice inside melted, and Hiccup spoke with no problem at all. His voice was even and clear, and he looked

his father in the eyes.

"No. Thank you, butâ€¦ no."

Eventually, Stoick lowered his chin once, a nod Hiccup knew well. It was his father acting as chieftain, accepting decisions or apologies or requests. He'd seen that nod a hundred times at council.

Then Stoick turned back to the sea, and the light that was slowly turning to amber and gold.

"What did you say to the Skjolsung chief? Do I need toâ€¦ fly there tomorrow? Talk to him personally?" Hiccup felt sick at the idea, but he'd do it.

Stoick shook his head.

"I said as soon as he offered that I was honored by his proposal, as were you, and that his daughter would be a fine bride to any man, any chief."

Stoick glanced at Hiccup, his eyebrows down. Hiccup held his breath.

"But I told him that you had already found your intended here on Berk."

The ground beneath him stopped spinning. He exhaled, slowly.

"Thanks, Dad."

"All right then," Stoick said, putting his hands on his knees and standing up. "Have to go down to the docks, check the nets we brought back, see how they're doing."

Hiccup remained sitting.

"Walk with me." But it was a request, not a command. "Tell me what you're working on."

Stoick waited while Hiccup put his notebook back into his pocket and adjusted his leg. Then they walked down the hillside together. As they talked, Stoick looked over the buildings they passed, inspecting the rooflines and checking for water where it shouldn't be. Hiccup told him about his ideas for putting out the dragon fires that occurred near the stables. Stoick looked at the rooflines again, and nodded thoughtfully.

When the path to the docks split away from the route to the academy, Stoick put his hand on Hiccup's shoulder.

"Long patrol tonight?"

"Yeah, probably back late."

"Everyone going?"

"I think so."

Stoick grunted. Hiccup understood perfectly.

"Don't worry," he said.

"Part of the job," Stoick answered.

64. Chapter 64: Around the Fire Again

****Around the Fire Again****

As the sun approached the water, Hiccup, Snotlout, Astrid, the twins and Fishlegs were ready to go. Hiccup found Snotlout first, and he was more than eager to go fly for several hours, especially if it meant he could continue to try to impress Ruffnut. The twins were always happy to set things on fire in any location, and Astrid and Fishlegs agreed that it was a good night for both patrols and long flights.

"Are we going west?" Astrid looked over at him as they climbed onto their saddles.

"No, not west," Hiccup said quickly, feeling his face begin to burn. He leaned down to adjust Toothless' tail fin mechanism so she couldn't see his face. "My dad just sailed there. North then east, then back to Berk?"

"Works for me," Snotlout said. "Let's go!"

Their dragons seemed just as eager to fly, and leaped into the sky as fast as they could, following one another in circular tumbles and curls in the air as they headed north toward the horizon. They spread out once they lost sight of Berk behind them, each looking at the water for any signs of ships they couldn't identify, or ships they did recognize that might be in trouble.

Hiccup felt the relief of distance between himself and Berk the farther they flew. After his conversation with his father, he'd been unable to fully relax. He worried that he'd made the wrong decision for Berk by making the right decision for himself, and even though his father had already known his answer, Hiccup still felt the weight of both sides of his choice. He'd said no to what might have been a very beneficial alliance, but he wasn't willing to marry someone he didn't know.

He frowned.

No. He wasn't willing to marry anyone who wasn't Astrid.

But even then, knowing he'd made the right decision for himself, Hiccup felt twisted with fear and anger that he'd made a decision that also affected Astrid, and he hadn't spoken with her about it - about anything, really. He should have, and he knew it - if someone had walked in on them in the forge.

It was a good thing he was flying, because he had plenty of excuses for why his entire face and neck were burning red.

Off to his right, in the distance, Hookfang and Snotlout were flying in broad circles in the air, diving over clouds and flying upside

down. Astrid was a tiny dot beyond Snotlout, almost out of sight. The twins had fallen behind, but were flying low over the water, trying to set the surface on fire. It hadn't worked the other times they'd tried, but their determination never faded. Fishlegs was far to the west of them, trying to keep away from Barf and Belch but within sight if one or both of them got tossed into the sea.

There was no one on the water, or in the air, but them. When the Svenson's island came into view in the distance, the twins flew ahead, flying between and above the neighboring islands to pick the best spot for an epic fire, the only kind of fire Tuffnut would tolerate for his dinner - which would be charred anyway, no matter the size of the fire. Hiccup slowed Toothless down and circled above the spot the twins had chosen. Then they hovered, watching as the others flew in to land. Snotlout leaped off Hookfang's back trying to impress Ruffnut, but she didn't see any of it, including the part where he tripped, rolled over, and landed on his head.

Tuffnut saw, though, and nearly fell over laughing, so much that he was unable to tell his sister what he was laughing at. So she punched him, narrowly missing Fishlegs, who had come up behind Tuff with more firewood.

Hiccup shook his head, very glad he was far from Berk that evening.

"What's wrong, Hiccup?"

Astrid and Stormfly glided on his right, and he looked over at her, surprised.

"Wrong?"

"You looked really unhappy when we left. You ok?"

"Y- yeah. Ready to eat?"

"Starving," she said with a grin. "Last one to land has to clean up!"

He beat her, but barely. "Enjoy cleanup," he called over his shoulder. He heard her growl in reply.

Ruffnut and Tuffnut were arguing about how far dragon gas could travel and still be flammable when he approached the fire. Astrid offered them some cabbage to test their theory, but Tuff turned her down, not getting the joke, while Ruffnut snickered and high fived Astrid behind his back.

The fire grew as Tuffnut added branches and dry pine needles to the blaze. It was a gift, Hiccup thought to himself. Tuffnut could set fire to anything, anywhere, without any dragon assistance.

Meatlug had carried all their food, including enough fish for all the dragons. Each rider had their own canteen, but the dragons need a drink, too. Hiccup looked over the edge of the rock outcropping they were camping on, searching for any water on the island, or melted ice pools.

"There's water on the far side," Snotlout called over to him. "Saw it

on my way in. Hookfang can find it."

Hookfang growled softly at Snotlout, and he smiled back. "Show them where it is?"

Hookfang nudged Meatlug to wake her up, and the other dragons followed around the side of the craggy peak that rose behind them. Hiccup locked Toothless' tail to an open position in case he needed to lift off or glide toward the water, and as Toothless disappeared around the side of the mountain, Hiccup noticed Ruffnut looking at Snotlout with a considering expression on her face.

When the dragons returned to the fire, they were all cooking chicken and fish on long sticks of wood, and had set out piles of fish for each dragon. The dragons ate immediately, then stretched out behind their riders by the fire for a nap.

The fire stayed high, thanks to Tuffnut's careful attention, and their food cooked quickly. As usual, Tuffnut crunched his way through burnt chicken. Ruffnut had refused to share her food with her brother, so Snotlout tried to impress her with his cooking skills. Unfortunately for her, they weren't much to speak of.

Fishlegs sat next to Hiccup, frowning into the fire. Hiccup had chosen a larger fish, as was his habit when cooking food anywhere near Astrid, and it was taking a little longer. But Fishlegs' chicken looked done to him. Overdone, almost.

"You going for a Tuffnut-style dinner tonight, Fishlegs?"

Fishlegs looked up, and pulled his stick back from the fire.

"Uh, no. Thanks." But he didn't start eating.

"What's on your mind?" Hiccup asked quietly. He knew Astrid, who was sitting beside him, was listening. The twins and Snotlout were busy offering burnt fish to Barf, who was absolutely not interested.

"Oh, nothing," Fishlegs said in a strange tone of voice.

"Is something wrong with Meatlug?"

"Meatlug?" Fishlegs' face brightened for a moment. "Oh, she's fine, aren't you, girl?" Meatlug, who was snoring, opened her mouth and made a happy snuffling sound when Fishlegs rubbed her belly, but she didn't wake up.

"You seem kinda sad, Fishlegs," Astrid added.

"I'm fine. Justâ€¦"

Hiccup sat and waited, turning his fish slowly. He could see Astrid looking at the fish she held over the fire - which was beginning to look withered - and then at his, and knew, as usual, he'd be sharing. He didn't mind.

Fishlegs took a bite of chicken leg, and looked absently into the fire.

"Justâ€¦?" Hiccup prompted him after a moment.

"I think my mom might be getting married again," he said.

Hiccup and Astrid stared at him.

"What makes you say that?"

"Hoark asked her if she would marry him?"

"Well, that would do it," Astrid said with a smile.

"Are you... happy about it?"

Fishlegs nodded, chewing another bite, still looking at the fire. His mom had been widowed when Fishlegs was three, and she was as formidable as Astrid's mother, though in a completely different way. Where Astrid's mother might rip someone's head off with one hand if she felt like it, Fishlegs' mother would feed guests for hours, then wrap them in eight furs and four strangely knotted scarves before letting them leave her house. In July.

"It doesn't..seem like you're happy, though," Astrid said. Hiccup pulled his fish off the fire and, using his knife, checked the inside to see if it was done. Not yet. He was positioning it over the flames when Fishlegs answered.

"I am. I mean, I'm happy for her. I like Hoark. He likes Meatlug, and Meatlug likes him. Butâ€|."

"It changes things?"

Fishlegs looked at Hiccup and nodded. "Yeah. Andâ€|I didn't expect it," he said. "Maybe I should have, but I didn't."

"I understand that," Hiccup said quietly. Astrid glanced at him as she looked over at Fishlegs.

"Would some things change for the better?" she asked.

Fishlegs shrugged at Astrid's question. "I guess. Some things will be better. I know she's happy, really happy. She hasn't stopped weaving and making things since he asked her."

Hiccup heard Astrid smother a groan and he bit his lips to hold in a laugh. They'd all be getting a strangely shaped garment come Snoggletog.

"Butâ€| I don't know."

"Are you speaking for your mother? When Hoark makes his offer?"

"No," Fishlegs replied, swallowing before he spoke. "Gunnarr will, though I have to be there, obviously."

Hiccup nodded. Fishlegs' mother was a twin, and had more siblings besides, though she only had one son. Fishlegs would definitely have to be part of the negotiations on his mother's behalf.

"Is that what's worrying you? The handsal negotiations?"

Hearing Astrid say "handsal" did very strange things to Hiccup's insides, as if everything in his chest and stomach had begun frantically knotting garments like Fishlegs' mother.

"No," Fishlegs said, his voice quiet. "Not really. Just thatâ€¦."

"Things will be different?" Hiccup suggested. Fishlegs thought for a moment, then nodded his head slowly.

"But it's good that she's happy," Astrid added.

"Yeah," Fishlegs agreed, with a hint of a smile on the edge of his mouth. He took another bite of his chicken. Hiccup removed his fish from the fire and checked it again. Perfect. He slid the skin away with his knife and broke up the meat with the edge, then offered some to Astrid. She stared at him, then smiled.

After giving her fish to Stormfly, who ate it immediately, she moved closer to Hiccup to more easily share his food. Then she leaned forward to speak to Fishlegs.

"There must be other good parts about this, right?"

"Good parts of what?" Tuffnut had moved closer to them, adding wood on their side of the fire to keep his epic blaze balanced.

"Hoark asked my mom to marry him," Fishlegs answered.

"No way!" Tuffnut gave him a huge grin and punched Fishlegs' arm with so much strength he nearly sent Fishlegs toppling over backwards. "Ruff, did you hear that?"

"What?"

"Hoark's gonna marry Fishlegs' mom!"

"Oh, that's excellent." Ruffnut's face lit with as much excitement as her brother's, brighter than the fire he was tending. "Hoark is the best!"

Fishlegs' smile grew slowly as the twins told him stories of how much fun Hoark could be, especially when hunting in the forest or helping them hide from their parents.

Hiccup looked over at Astrid, who was taking more of his fish. Well, their fish.

She licked her fingers and shrugged. Apparently Hoark received hearty Thorston approval. For whatever reason, that made Fishlegs happy.

65. Chapter 65: Farther Away

****Farther Away****

After they ate, the fire continued to burn, and they sat together longer than they probably needed to. But the dragons were happy, and

so were the riders, and there was plenty to talk about. Warmer weather brought a different set of tasks for each of them, including more dragon training and increased responsibility amid the village tasks they already performed.

They talked about new dragons, types they hadn't trained yet, and whether they could or not. Hiccup was mildly optimistic about some of them, but Snotlout was absolutely convinced he could train any dragon he came across. Fishlegs just shook his head at him.

They talked about the village, too. That autumn was likely to host a few weddings, certainly one at least, and while Fishlegs talked about his mother's nuptials, Hiccup tried to keep his face neutral and to keep his cheeks from turning dark red. He wasn't entirely successful, but it was dark enough that not much showed. He hoped.

Then Fishlegs turned to Hiccup and said, "Hey, isn't your dad's birthday soon?"

Hiccup nodded. "Yeah, couple of weeks. I have to think of a gift for him."

He saw Astrid turn her head towards him on the periphery of his vision, but he didn't look at her. He was still fighting too many signs of embarrassment on his face, and she'd see through most of them.

Snotlout laughed. "Just get him a shield. Or a sword. Easy. I get my dad one every year."

Hiccup nodded slowly, though he knew his dad had enough of both, and fewer occasions to use them. He frowned. Did Stoick miss fighting, the rush of battle and the use of his weapons? He kept his knife with him like the others, but he hadn't walked around with a sword in years.

Hiccup wondered if the changes in Berk made his father entirely happy.

Fishlegs' voice then caught his attention. "You could make him a new saddle. With all the carvings and stuff."

"That's not a bad idea," Hiccup replied. But his dad didn't ride all that often, and had a saddle. He didn't want to get his father something he didn't need. Resources of any kind were scarce, and his father really didn't like knowing that needed items had been used on luxuries for anyone, especially for himself.

"We could set something on fire," Tuffnut said.

"That would be the opposite of a gift," Hiccup replied. "But I have to say, this fire is pretty epic."

"You're right. It is." Tuffnut nodded gravely, then grinned widely. "Because I made it!"

Then Astrid said, in a quiet voice that carried between them, "You'll think of something."

He smiled at her briefly, then looked back at the flames.

Soon after, they packed up to head east and back around toward Berk. The moon had risen, a wide curve of white in the sky, and the sky was clear above them, filled with stars. They'd have plenty of light for flying and watching the sea below.

They spread out as they had before. The twins were down at the edge of the waves again, trying to set them on fire, and Snotlout was riding above them, still trying to impress Ruffnut with his aerial stunts. Astrid had flown far to the east, and Fishlegs had followed her.

During the hours it took to cover their patrol route, they flew over the water far apart from one another. They came together when they turned back toward Berk and rose high into the air to practice fighting maneuvers, diving around one another and sliding into formations that allowed the dragons to fire all at once without endangering the others.

Then, for fun, the dragons fired into the cold night air and rode over the ripples of heat that resulted. Barf and Belch grew impatient with the twin's continued interest in setting the ocean on fire, and probably understood better than the twins that doing so was impossible. So they flew upside down and refused to roll back over until the twins finally agreed to stop.

"Whoa. My head is spinning," Tuffnut said. "Or wait. Maybe I'm not spinning, and everyone else is."

Ruffnut looked at her brother with a queasy expression on her face and said, "You should try spinning around on Belch to make it stop."

"Good idea." Tuffnut nodded in a somewhat circular motion and then tried to spin himself around on Belch's neck. He immediately fell off his saddle.

"I'm not spinning! I'm falling!" Tuffnut yelled.

Ruffnut rolled her eyes as Barf and Belch flapped their wings and sped up to dive toward him. Belch grabbed Tuffnut by the back of his vest and shook him repeatedly as they flew back into the air alongside the others.

"I think Belch is mad at you," Ruffnut said, laughing.

"Nah, he's sha-a-a-a-king out the spinning fee-ee-eeling. I taught him tha-a-a-at."

"There's an island up ahead," Astrid said. "We can stop there and maybe tie Tuffnut to his saddle."

"Don't bother," Tuffnut said, waving an arm. "You're all still rotating around me. I'd just get tangled in the rope."

They landed briefly, just long enough for Ruffnut to punch her brother, telling him she could stop the spinning by using his head as an anchor.

"Guys, we kind of need to get home," Fishlegs said.

Hiccup agreed with him, but he didn't want to hurry. He didn't want to go home, and say good night to everyone, and then worry about someone telling Astrid about the proposal. He'd had plenty of time to think while flying, and had realized he needed to speak to her soon. Stoick wouldn't tell anyone, but he hadn't been alone at the treaty signing. Others were there, and would have heard the conversation. Plus, traders would start arriving in the harbor after visiting other villages, and they carried news and gossip as much as they carried weapons and dry goods. Eventually people would know, and eventually Astrid would hear about it, and he wanted to tell her himself before any of that.

But how he was supposed to find time to tell her when he wasn't supposed to be alone with her was a bit of a problem.

Hiccup allowed himself to look over at Astrid. She saw his face and frowned back at him.

And when everyone else took off, she stayed, standing alongside Stormfly, watching him.

"What's wrong, Hiccup? You look miserable. Are you ok?"

His words came out in a rush, as if he were inside his own throat, pushing them forward as fast as he could.

"I need to talk to you."

She came around Stormfly's wing and stood on Toothless' other side, watching him. "Ok?"

Hiccup took a deep breath and said just as quickly, "The Skjolsung chieftain asked me to marry him -"

"Heâ€¦ what?" Astrid started to laugh.

"- his daughter- he asked me to marry his daughter."

Astrid froze, eyes widened.

"He came to Berk?"

"No, he asked my dad. During the treaty signing."

Astrid's expression didn't change. "Oh."

"I didn't want you to hear about it from anyone but me."

Her skin went pale. But then her face shuttered. She looked like she was about to throw her axe in practice, at a tree she knew was easy to hit.

"I guess yo- congratulations are in order?"

"What? No!"

Astrid frowned. But her face was still closed to him, unreadable. He moved even faster than he spoke, furious at her, and at himself. He jumped over Toothless' tail and came toward her, though he had to

stop where Toothless' wing stood between them.

"Astrid, no. I said no."

She blinked. Then again. "Oh."

"Yes, 'Oh.' Did you think I would - that I-" His throat closed. She thought he would _agree_?

"Yes, because... you're the chieftain's son and you're going to be chief someday. It's perfectly sensible-"

"You sound like my dad."

"Because it's true!"

Astrid took a breath, and Hiccup stared at her. She moved away from Toothless and stood alongside Stormfly, resting her hand on her saddle, looking down. Then she looked over her shoulder at Hiccup. Her face was still, almost like stone.

"You know we're the only tribe with dragon riders, and the only one with a dragon academy teaching more vikings to fly. Of course other tribes want to align with us."

Hiccup shook his head, completely confused, as usual.

"It would make sense to agree," she said softly.

"No. No, it wouldn't."

"Yes, it would," she said, her voice rough. "You're going to be chief-"

"I know that, stop reminding me," he grumbled, coming over to her.

"No, Hiccup. I won't," she said, her voice rising. "One of us has to remember."

"Believe me, I'm plenty aware," he said in a barely controlled growl.

He looked down at the rock beneath his feet, then out at the water that surrounded them. He didn't want to speak to her that way. Astrid sighed, a deep, resigned sound that he felt as much as heard.

"You could marry and join our tribe with one that has alliances already in place. We wouldn't have worry about war or invasion." Her voice was flat and low again, as if she were giving directions to someone she didn't know.

Hiccup didn't welcome that cold, sick feeling clogging his throat again. He felt like he had in the forge, after she'd said he was her weakness, and how much she hated it. Like she had punched him and ripped out his heart.

"You could marry someone withâ€¦| incredible status, Hiccup. Especially now. "

He looked at her, despair and anger mixing in his chest. It felt like a physical pain, like his heart was dissolving. Did Astrid dislike how he felt about her? Did she want him to marry someone else? Did she not want him at all? Even after.

Then he saw her blink hard, squeezing her eyes shut. She pushed her bangs out of her eyes and he saw her hand, resting on her saddle, was tightly fisted, her knuckles white.

"You could marry someone of rank and create peace for most of the tribes we know of, and probably some we don't. And I'm not anyone, Hiccup."

He lost sight of her as his temper exploded. He stepped closer, glaring at her.

"Do not _ever_ say that about yourself."

She stood as if she were made of iron, cold and hardened and immovable. She looked at him with sad but clear eyes.

"I know you, Hiccup. I know how much you hate fighting, and how happy you were to end the war with the dragons. But we still train and prepare for invasions, even with dragons on our side. We still patrol for our enemies. We're doing it now! And you might never have to do that again, if you."

Then he heard his father's voice in his head as she trailed off, saying that his choice meant a decision had been made.

The reminder calmed him like it had before. He ignored how her words felt like knives. He pushed aside the noise of his own anger and confusion, and forced himself to listen to how she spoke, instead of what she said. He stopped listening to reasons he knew he wouldn't agree with, and watched her.

She swallowed hard as she spoke, arguing with him, and he saw the corners of her mouth tremble, and the way her breath came in jagged bursts. Her brows were pinched together, and her skin was pale. She held herself so still she looked brittle, when at any other time she wore the fluid awareness of her own strength like a garment wrapped around her.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Yes," he said.

"Hiccup -"

"I said no."

"But -"

"Astrid. No."

She opened her mouth like she was about to argue, and for a moment he thought about reminding her of his rank again, just to make her angry enough to stop arguing.

That was the point, he realized. Rank or not, heir or not, he made

his decision. No one was making that decision for him. He already had more than enough choices made for him already, most of them decided at birth. And no one, not even Astrid, was going to tell him that he should do something that went directly against everything that made sense.

And in the space of a moment, when he placed his fingers gently on her lips to stop her from arguing, during the breath he took after that, he realized he didn't know for certain that she felt the same way he did. He suspected that maybeâ€|what withâ€|.

But he didn't know. And it didn't matter.

He knew how he felt. Every chieftain on the north seas could approach him and his answer wouldn't change.

"No," he repeated, not trying to hide his feelings, or hide how much he meant what he was saying.

She shook her head, then stopped. He pushed her bangs off her face gently, and she closed her eyes. He didn't know if she was listening, or if she understood.

Then he heard Fishlegs' yell carry over the water towards them as the other riders flew into the distance. His time was up. And he hadn't told her the rest, what his saying no meant. That was the part he was most afraid of, because it affected her, andâ€| he knew he had to ask, and he still wasn't sure how to do it.

At least she knew, he thought as they stood across from one another. She knew his answer, and even if she disagreed with his decision - he ignored the whip of pain inside his chest at the thought - he wouldn't change it.

She hadn't smiled. She hadn't moved except to open her eyes. She looked up at him, her expression sad and still.

Then she turned and climbed onto Stormfly's back, pulling her hood over her face.

"Time to go," she said softly.

He looked up at her for a moment, then climbed onto Toothless. Without a word, they took off, their dragon's wings pushing them faster into the air and farther apart.

66. Chapter 66: Sewing Unguarded

****Sewing Unguarded****

Astrid avoided everyone the following day, especially Hiccup. She did her chores, flew with Stormfly to make sure her dragon had enough time in the air, and landed when no one was around the academy or the stables. A small miracle, given that it was a clear and cloudless day, and everyone wanted to be flying.

The silence that surrounded her after she flew away from Hiccup on that unnamed island, after she walked home alone, after she refused to let herself look back over her shoulderâ€|it was louder than any

battle she'd ever experienced. This silence was bigger than when the Red Death crashed to the ground in front of her, and it knocked her backwards even more. It wouldn't leave her alone. It had weight, like everyone and everything around her was holding its breath and watching her.

Flying didn't help. Axe throwing didn't help. And she didn't want to talk to anyone, either.

Well, she admitted to herself as she walked into her home and climbed the stairs to her room, that wasn't entirely true. She wanted to talk to Hiccup. He could help her make sense of everything chasing itself around in her mind. She could rant and yell and he'd listen, but there was no way she could talk to him about... this. Not when he was the problem she struggled with.

So she picked up her sewing project, after a week away from it. Even though it was for Hiccup, and she didn't know when she'd be able to talk to him or even look at him without feeling like she couldn't swallow or breathe, she needed something to do. Something quiet, something that didn't come with the chance of seeing anyone or having to speak with anyone.

Sewing was as slow and painful as ever. She had to stop to sew finger guards before she could move on with her actual project. The callouses she had normally from axe throwing, battle practice, and flying weren't enough protection from the needle and the force needed to pierce the leather and fabric beneath it. This project was more difficult than the pillow she'd made, which she'd undone and resewn at least three times that she remembered.

But it would be worth it. She could feel it, like she felt the sound and movement of a perfect throw of her axe, knowing it was strong and true before it sank deep into the wood. Like the rush of air beneath Stormfly as they twisted through the air perfectly. Each stitch had a tiny piece of that feeling of anticipation and confidence.

She had to be patient with herself, as usual, which was never easy. Plus, this part, sewing the two sides together, was difficult and painful. And slow.

And the slow was a problem. Sewing gave her too much room to think.

She put the leather down, removed the guards from her fingers, and switched to an easier task, hemming the edge of the fabric so it would be smooth and soft at the edge, with no gathers or creases. And as her hands began the repetitive movements of holding the edge and sliding her needle beneath it, her mind moved again toward the things she was trying to avoid thinking about at all.

Only one thing, really.

Then she pierced her fingertip with the needle. Blood beaded and threatened to run, and she cursed, pushing the fabric away so she wouldn't stain it.

She sat back, her finger in her mouth, and looked up at the clouds through her window. She heard Mornen's voice in her head: "Don't be a coward."

Mornen always knew when Astrid was avoiding something, because Astrid would avoid Mornen. She knew Mornen would make her face what she didn't want to deal with. Whatever it was that was bothering her, Mornen wouldn't allow her to hide from her own problems.

But there was no avoiding Mornen in her imagination.

"I'm not a coward. I'm afraid." Astrid hoped no one was home to hear her talking to herself.

Mornen would have snorted at her and said those were the same thing. Astrid knew they weren't.

She picked up the fabric once her finger had stopped bleeding, and tried to find where she left off. It was difficult. The light was fading. The sun had already traversed the wall of her room in the time she'd been sitting alone and was now fading behind the cliffs. If she didn't get a candle she'd have to stop soon, and there weren't any stubs or fragments in her room. She wasn't sure she could get a new one from her mother without answering a lot of questions about why she needed something so expensive for her own private use. She didn't want to bring her work downstairs near the fire, because she didn't want to answer questions about that, either.

If she asked Hiccup, he would give her a candle fragment from the forge.

But that would mean talking to him, and she couldn't. She couldn't talk to him, not about something mundane like candles when there were so many other things in the way that she needed to say, but didn't know how.

Holding the fabric closer to her eyes, she found where she'd left off, and began hemming the edge again, slower this time so she didn't risk more bloodshed. She picked up one of the guards she'd made for sewing the leather and slid it back on, moving it over the tip of her finger just in case.

Her mind quieted with the repetitive motion of folding the fabric, and sliding her needle above and beneath the edge, but the quiet made more room for more questions she didn't want to ask of herself.

Mornen would have asked her, bluntly with no honey before the massive hatchet, "What do you gain if you face what's chasing you? What do you lose if you don't?"

It would hurt, she thought to herself, though probably less than sewing. Maybe.

It would hurt, and hurt a lot, either way, if she faced her problem, or if she didn't.

She slid her needle over and under the fabric, creating a row of tiny stitches that were strong enough to hold but small enough that they couldn't be seen.

Her insides were turning over, spinning like Tuffnut off his dragon. About the only thing that was orderly was the row of stitches in her

hands.

What would she lose?

Nothing. No, everything.

What would she gain?

More than everything.

But she couldn't fully articulate that she feared, deep inside a space of her heart that was so dark and secret she rarely looked at it, that she wasn't right for Hiccup.

Is that what you're afraid of? Mornen would have asked. Mornen wouldn't have let her leave her house without an answer, either. It was a good thing Astrid was alone in her own room by her window, because didn't know the answer.

She had no idea if she was more afraid that she was wrong for Hiccup, or more afraid that he was right for her. Perfect for her. What had been friendship and curiosity and determination had turned into something flammable and serious, and it was frightening.

She didn't like the fear, the ice inside her, the feeling that she couldn't take a deep breath, because it would hurt.

Mornen would have raised a brow at her and told her to breathe. Like she had when Astrid had visited her after-

Astrid sat up with a small gasp.

She knew this fear.

She was as afraid now as when she thought that Hiccup was dying.

She was afraid of losing him, afraid that she would if she didn't tell him how much she cared.

And she was afraid of how much it was going to hurt if she allowed herself to care for him like she wanted to, how much it would hurt to tell him, how scary it would be to face what she felt, and know she could lose him anyway.

Astrid looked down at the fabric in her hand and realized she'd sewn all the way around back to where she'd begun. She'd finished her hem.

She put her needle down and forced herself to have more courage.

Astrid looked out the window at the sky and thought of how she felt when she flew alongside him, or with him, her arms around his chest, her head on his shoulder, looking out at the world and sharing his view. How she felt when he smiled at her, the grin that was solely hers. And, her cheeks beginning to burn, she thought about how she felt when he kissed her, the fire and warmth and impossible strength that flared between them.

She already did care. She cared too much, so much that it hurt, as

much as it gave her joy.

She picked up the leather pieces she'd already sewn, and fitted them against the fabric she'd just finished. The needle that Hiccup had made her was still strong and sharp and perfect. She slid the guards onto her fingers to protect herself from piercing her skin again, though sewing through the pieces, even with the guards, would still hurt her fingers after awhile.

But Astrid got back to the hard part, painful and difficult as it was.

It would be worth it.

67. Chapter 67: Unfamiliar Ships

****Unfamiliar Ships****

Astrid avoided everyone the following day as well. She felt raw, as if her skin had been scrubbed for too long and left sensitive to any air current that went past.

She especially avoided Hiccup. She wasn't angry at him, but everything inside her felt like sharp edges, leaving her afraid of drawing a deep breath for fear it would hurt.

She did her morning chores while it was still dark, then took her axe and hiked for hours until she found a clearing she hadn't seen before. Then she threw, the metal gleaming as it flew farther and farther away from her, the blade landing deep into whatever she aimed at. She threw until she couldn't lift her arms anymore.

Then she sat down in the grass, laid back, and looked at the clouds passing overhead. They were almost running through the sky, pushed by the wind.

She heard Mornen's voice in her mind, clear as ever: Go home, Astrid. Chin up and walk forward.

Astrid laughed softly, but she stood and put her axe over her shoulder.

When she walked back to Berk, she followed a route that eventually led her past the chief's house. Hiccup was sitting on the steps, a large piece of wood on his lap, with an enormous sheet of paper tacked to it.

Traders must have come that morning. No wonder it was easy to avoid people. They'd all been at the docks.

She looked closer. Whatever he'd traded for that paper, it must have been costly. She'd never seen a sheet that big, all in one piece before. It didn't look sewn together or glued with wax or anything.

She stood still, and watched him. He was drawing something, something huge - obviously, given the paper in front of him - and he was being so careful about it. He would look up, off to the west, then down at the page, then up again before he moved his charcoal.

He must have felt her watching him. She hadn't moved, her shadow didn't reach him, and she made no sound, but he lifted his head and turned toward her as if she'd called his name.

At first he looked wary, and moved to cover his drawing with his arm. When he saw it was Astrid, he smiled at her, open and happy, before the look on her face made the smile fade away. He held her gaze for a moment, then nodded at her, and looked away, back to the cliffs on the western side of the island.

It broke something inside her that he looked away from her, that he didn't look back, that she'd caused him to do so. Then she saw his back curve slightly over the paper, as if he was protecting himself and what he was working on.

Astrid shouldered her axe and moved forward.

She crossed the grass and sat down next to him on the steps of his house. The village lay before them, each rooftop pointing to the sea, the cliffs and sentry lanterns beyond marking the boundaries of Berk, the perimeter of their home.

There was a plate of dried fish and dried fruit next to him, and she realized she was hungry.

"May I have some?"

He glanced at her, then frowned back at the paper. "Of course."

That broken piece inside her hurt worse, and a lump formed in her throat that she couldn't swallow past without effort.

She took a small piece of fruit and held it in her hand, watching him draw. The marks he made with the charcoal were light, and easy to wipe away if he needed - and he removed and redrew lines while she watched. A curve on the left was reshaped and shaded until she recognized it.

"The western cliffs," she said.

"Yeah," he replied in a quiet voice.

"Are you drawing Berk?"

"Trying to," he replied, his voice dry. She flinched back and moved to stand, but he grabbed her arm to stop her. "No, don't. Don't go. You're not bothering me. I'mâ€|." He swallowed quickly.

"I'm glad you're here. I'm having trouble because I haven't drawn anything this large in scale before."

He looked into her eyes as he spoke, and the sadness in his gaze ended her effort to leave. She sat back, leaning against the wooden post next to his door.

Hiccup glanced over at her, then turned his head and looked, at her and at where she was sitting. But he didn't say anything. He smiled at her, her smile, that half grin that belonged only to her, and seeing it smoothed the ragged edges inside her chest. His focus

returned to the drawing before she could smile back.

"Did traders come today?" she asked after a few minutes.

"Oh, yeah, this morning. I looked for you - they had so much cloth, some I'd never seen before. Dark red woven withâ€ something else. I don't know what it was, but it was really strong."

He'd looked at fabric for her. She stared down at the food in her hand.

"It's ok," she said. "I'll catch the next ship that comes in. I'm not lacking anything."

He nodded, looking back down at the drawing. Using his hand, he marked a spot on the page, then another, holding his finger and thumb apart, looking up at the village then down at his hand.

"I've never seen a sheet of paper that big."

"Me, neither," he said, grinning, though keeping his eyes on his charcoal. He was plotting pieces of the village, making small marks where houses, the feeding stations, and the weather vane might go, or so she guessed. "I had to buy some when I saw the stack of it."

"What did you trade for the paper? A dragon?"

Hiccup laughed, and the sound moved through her, over her, and into her skin like the warmth of a fire on a cold night. "No, not a dragon. Toothless is still here somewhere. He'll come find me and want to go flying soon."

"You haven't flown yet today?"

"No. I was with my father this morning, when the traders came. It was a new ship, one we didn't know, so we went down to meet them alone before we let anyone aboard."

Astrid's eyes widened. "Your dad didn't think it was safe?"

Hiccup shrugged. "Neither of us recognized the ship, or the sails. The captain and the crew were armed, swords as big as any I'd seen. So we told everyone to stay up in the village and walked down to the docks together."

"Were you armed?"

"Dad had a knife. I wasn't carrying anything."

"Hiccup -"

He looked over at her, shaking his head, wearing a piece of a grin. "I didn't think they were dangerous. As they sailed into harbor, none of them moved a hand toward their weapons. The captain kept his hands up and open on the wheel, and in front of him as he greeted my dad."

"Still," Astrid said. "Could you talk to them?"

"No, not really. They spoke a language I'd never heard before, but they knew a few words we understood. You should have seen their ship, Astrid. So many things I'd never seen before. Fabric with gold threads, or what looked like gold, anyway. Books in languages I didn't know. Spices and perfumes - the captain wanted to give my dad a gift of some scented oil, and I could smell it clear across the ship."

Astrid laughed. "What else was there?"

"Dried fruits," he said, gesturing to the plate beside him with his charcoal before he drew another faint line on the page. "Some weapons - oh, and arrows. I traded for some of those, too. They're in the forge. Wait until you see them. There are four points behind each tip. I want to figure out how to make some."

He sketched faster as he spoke, and Astrid didn't want him to stop, not the drawing or the story.

"Anything dragon related?"

"Not that I saw, but I didn't know how to ask them. And the dragons usually stay hidden when the traders come."

Astrid nodded, taking another piece of dried fruit. It wasn't something she'd eaten before, but it was delicious. She looked closely, trying to identify it. It was angular, and dark yellow, almost striped, and very sweet. "What is this? Did you get this today?"

He glanced at the fruit in her hand. "Yeah. I don't know what it is though. The traders called it... something that sounded like _anahas_, but I don't know what it is."

Astrid ate her piece then looked down at the plate. "Oh, no," she groaned.

"What's wrong?"

She looked up at him, feeling awful. "I ate all of it. I didn't notice and ate the last piece. I'm sorry, Hiccup."

"It's fine," he said with a faint smile. "I got it for you."

She stilled, feeling her face catch fire. "Really?"

"Yeah," he replied, like it was the most obvious thing in the world, that he'd trade what he had for something she might like.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"You're welcome," he replied. He moved the paper away from him and began plotting out the images he'd sketch on to the bottom third of the sheet.

"So," Astrid said, trying for a normal voice when inside she felt like she was flying in spirals. "You had a busy morning, then. New traders, diplomacy, arrows and dried fruit."

"And paper," he added

"And paper."

68. Chapter 68: More Unspoken Than Not

****More Unspoken Than Not****

Astrid sat with Hiccup while he continued to draw. It was mid-day, and most everyone was out around the village, hauling fish from the docks, hanging clothes to dry, and carrying out their normal tasks. Eventually he stopped and sat back, looking at what he'd done, then at the village, then back to the paper, checking if what he'd sketched matched what he saw.

She leaned forward and moved her feet to the step below his, wrapping her arms around her knees,

He looked over and smiled. Then he reached behind her head. "You have grass in your braid," he said, pulling out pieces one at a time.

She laughed. "Be careful," she warned. "You start combing my hair and the whole village will turn up to watch."

Hiccup focused on her, his gaze open and fearless, as he tugged another piece of grass from the twists of her braid.

But he stopped touching her hair after that, and she felt badly for having said anything. It had felt like she didn't have a word for the way the subtle tugging on her braid made her feel, knowing that he was touching her hair, in full view of everyone who cared to look. It had felt like the most normal and most terrifying thing she'd experienced. A gesture so minor and so meaningful and she was sorry she'd said anything to end it.

Then his cheeks began to turn red.

"I'm sorry," he said in a quiet voice, a spear of yellow grass in his hand.

"For what?"

"Upsetting you," he replied.

Astrid looked down at her feet. She knew he wasn't talking about her braid. "I was upset but it's not your fault. You didn't do anything."

She knew he watched her, waiting for her to explain, but she didn't know what to say. Eventually he turned back to his drawing and sketched the western boundaries of the village on the margin of the page.

She had to be brave again. Even if it hurt.

"Hiccup, that won't be the last marriage offer you receive."

"Yes, it will," he said immediately, not looking up at her. His pencil moved across the page without hesitation.

"No, I don't think so. Come on, think about it." A knot formed in her stomach but she made herself speak anyway. "If you turned that down, then another offer, from a bigger tribe or one with greater treaties in place-"

He put his pencil down and faced her. He didn't look angry, though. He lookedâ€¦worried.

"There might be an alliance you can't turn down," she said quietly.

He shook his head, then looked down at the stone beneath them and took a breath.

"There might be, but I doubt it. It wouldn't reach me or my dad, anyway."

"Why not?"

He took another slow breath, like he was dreading something. Cold knotted in her chest again as her imagination drew up a terrifying list of what it might be that he was trying not to tell her. She pulled her braid over her shoulder and held onto it with her fingertips.

"Because, Astridâ€¦."

He looked up at her, focused entirely on her. The cold began to melt.

"Iâ€¦I made the decision," he said, moving his right hand in front of him, palm toward her. "And I did it without asking you and... I'm sorry."

"What are you talking about?" He lowered his hand and looked away. Then she noticed the movement of his jaw, and realized he was clenching his teeth behind his frown. "Why are you angry at me?"

He looked back at her. "I'm not angry at you at all. I'm angry at myself - Iâ€¦. When I told my dad that I wasn't going to accept the offer of marriage, I made a decision."

"Well, obviously-"

"No, Astrid, you don't understand. I made a choice."

"I understand that, Hiccup. You told me. You said... no."

He looked away, and it looked like he was muttering to himself.

"But there might -"

He turned back and glared. "No, there won't be. No one else will offer."

"Why not?"

"Because I chose you."

She stared at him. The ice disappeared, and in its place was a warmth

that spread across her chest and down her arms. And over her neck and cheeks, she realized. Her face was practically on fire.

"Either way, as my dad said, I was making a choice. When I turned down the offer, I chose you. "

She couldn't move. She stared at him, and couldn't think of a thing to say. Part of her, the part that could identify targets and always knew if she could hit them, that part wanted her to tell him that he shouldn't have, that he'd made the wrong choice. But she wouldn't let that part speak. And no other part of her knew what to say.

Eventually he turned back to his drawing, but he didn't pick up the charcoal that lay beside him. He looked up at the sun, eyes narrowed, then over to the stables.

"I have to go," he said, his voice neutral. How did he do that? She couldn't have spoken normally if her life depended on it. "I'm sorry," he said again.

She shook her head. He didn't need to apologize. But she couldn't speak.

Hiccup stood up, opened the door to his house and put the paper and wood inside. She watched as he slid it behind a table near the door, facing the wall. He picked up the plate and put it on the table.

Then he shut the door behind him. He was unsteady on the stairs, as if he leg was bothering him. She stood as he reached the ground, picking up her axe.

"See you later?" He looked up at her, an uncertain smile on his face.

She nodded.

Astrid watched him walk down the hill until he was out of sight.

...

The rest of Hiccup's day was easy, a rare occurrence for which he was thankful because he didn't have much energy to spare. His mind was in a state of complete chaos since he'd spoken to Astrid. He'd told her almost everything, but he didn't know how to explain that his dad had as much told the other chief that they were engaged - or close to it. Hiccup hadn't approached the subject with Astrid before all this, and didn't know how he could at this point. He was barely able to form normal sentences when she'd said "handsal" to Fishlegs.

He hated being pushed into things, even if he knew logically it was for the best - and also knew that his dad had done him a favor by declining the chieftain's offer before he left.

He doubly hated knowing that Astrid might have been pushed into something that she didn't seem to fully realize.

But he hated most of all that she hadn't spoken to him.

Not since that morning, anyway. He'd seen her at the academy, but she'd only smiled at him - a warm and familiar smile at least, but she hadn't said a word. After they'd done some training in the academy, she hadn't said anything to him while they discussed as a group which routes to take for the flying exercise. They'd flown separately, teaching sets of new riders rescue techniques they would need if someone should fall into the water while flying. They had seasons on Berk, but the water never reached a temperature that could be considered warm. The sea was always lethal in strength, and in temperature.

When he'd returned, Astrid's group had already landed and left the academy, but he didn't look for her. He had to hurry to get to the springs if he wanted to be back before full dark. And he knew he had to walk. Toothless was exhausted and Hiccup would feel guilty for bringing him to the springs two weeks in a row. It wasn't Toothless' favorite place.

He stopped at his house, looking down at the front steps as he climbed them, and grabbed his clothes and the soap he'd bought that morning. As he walked through the forest, he kept his eyes down on the path in front of him.

He realized as he counted backwards through his memories that only a week had gone by since Astrid had sat next to him by the springs and combed out her hair, and then kissed him.

Everything that had happened, as close as they had been and now as far apart as they were, it had only been a week. Hiccup shook his head. He'd messed everything up, and had no idea how to fix it.

69. Chapter 69: An Unexpected Request

****An Unexpected Request****

Hiccup knew that because he had to walk, and because he was still a little sore, and because in so many other respects he was dragging his feet, or foot, he thought with a wry grin, the walk to the springs would take awhile. But it was longer than he expected, and once again, he arrived in the late afternoon when the shadows of the trees formed sentries across the path. He was the only one there.

He was used to seeing other people at the springs and been expecting to see clothing on the rocks and hung on the jagged edges of the cliff wall. Being alone meant again he had nothing to distract himself from his own thoughts, which weren't all that pleasant.

He pulled off his clothing, detached his leg and left it on the rock he sat on before sliding into the water.

The soap he'd traded for turned out to be a good distraction. It had a subtle scent to it, a bit like the pieces of toasted wood on the edge of the forge fire. There'd been a lot of soap to choose from, some of it so potent it made his eyes water, like the soap Snotlout and several other men had sampled on the trader's ship that morning. Somebody had definitely bought some. He could smell traces of it in the air above the springs.

He washed his hair, and then his skin, ducking under the water to rinse. When he surfaced, he discovered that the soap had created a raft of foam and bubbles on the surface of the spring. And since he was the only one there, he tossed handfuls of soap bubbles in to the air for his own amusement, watching as they broke apart in the breeze and floated down to ride the sliding surface of the water below.

Eventually he got out of the water, dried off, put on clean clothing, and sat on his rock to wait for his skin to dry. It was warm enough that he didn't put on his shirt right away, but the air was cooling, and he was glad the surface of the stone still held the warmth from the sun.

He had his notebook, so he sketched, drawing versions of each of the houses on Berk from memory. So many had carved dragons on them, and for what he had planned, he wanted the carved dragons to look like carvings. But he'd grown so accustomed to drawing dragons as accurately as possible that trying to make dragons look like pieces of wood was surprisingly difficult.

Sketching kept some of the thoughts he didn't want to deal with yet on the periphery of his mind, but he knew they were there, circling, waiting to pounce on him, probably when he went to bed. He had started a third attempt at drawing a carving of Stormfly when he heard a noise behind him.

"Hello?"

There was no reply, but the silence of every other living thing near the cove told him something, or someone, was there.

"You can come out. I know you're there."

Hiccup waited a moment, and when silence was again the only reply, he started to dry off his leg to affix his prosthesis. Whoever it was, they were a pain in his-

A bag with shoulder armor and a skirt beneath it landed in front of the boulder again.

Then Astrid crept forward, looking around, making sure they were alone. Her hair was wet and coiled like it had been the previous week, and her skin was flushed. She had the same leggings and old tunic on, and for a moment, Hiccup wished time travel were possible so he could go back a week and undo what had happened between them.

Well, some of what had happened between them. There were some memories he wouldn't want to give back.

He watched her approach the rock, her movements slow and almost hesitant. He was so surprised to see her, he didn't speak. So he was shocked when she spoke first, and even more shocked at what she said.

"Can I borrow your leg?"

He did not expect to ever hear those words in that order from Astrid.

From anyone.

"Beg your pardon?"

She looked so uncomfortable.

She wasn't the only one.

"Can I borrow your leg, just for a minute? I'll only be a second."

"Are you going to give it back?"

She glared at him. "Hiccup! Of course I'm going to give it back."

She wanted to take his leg somewhere, and she was irritated at him for being concerned. And he wondered why he was so confused by her.

He opened his mouth-

"Don't ask why. Please. I can't tell you."

Hiccup looked at her, closely. She looked...really uncomfortable. Beautiful as ever, confusing as always, but miserable.

"Ok."

Astrid relaxed visibly, like ice giving way into the water during the thaw. She approached him, her hand out.

"I'm not sure what you're doing-"

"I can't tell you."

"I know that, but I want to make sure you won't change anything. I'm-"

"Making adjustments, I know." She smiled up at him, and he forgot everything that had been in his head before that moment.

"Yeah. Um, so. Here." He handed the mechanism down to her, telling the part of him that was panicked at the idea of being without it that Astrid would never take it and run.

"Wow. You have made adjustments." Seeing his prosthesis in her hands wasâ€¦ he could feel his face turning red. It was almost erotic, watching her fingers manipulate the different parts, figuring out how it worked.

"Yes." His voice cracked, and on a short word. Great. Hiccup coughed to cover it up. "What do you need, specifically? Can you tell me that?"

"Nope. Can't tell you. I'll be right back."

And she ran off.

With his leg.

Oh, gods.

Hiccup sat, his right leg dangling over the edge of the rock, his left tucked slightly beneath him. He waited. He could hear her - she was nearby, probably on the other side of those boulders by the path.

What was she doing?

He tried not to think that maybe she was tricking him, that he'd put it on, stand up, and fall down. She wouldn't. Astrid was ruthless and competitive, and infuriating, but she was always, always fair. And she had been so angry at him for working in the forge while his leg had been bothering him. She wouldn't try to injure him again.

The longer he sat, though, the harder it was not to worry.

Astrid had seen him at some of the worst moments of his life, but right in that moment, he had never felt so vulnerable.

He was about to call her name when she reappeared, tucking a scrap of paper into her bag.

"Thanks."

She handed his leg up to him, and he wouldn't let himself look it over closely. He wanted to, to reassure himself. But this was Astrid. Unless Snotlout had made himself a very convincing Astrid costume, there was no way she'd try to hurt him like that. She was more likely to punch him than trick him into hurting himself.

He looked at her, wondering if she was going to head back to Berk.

She went over to her bag, dug beneath the armor and the drying cloth on top, and came back toward him holding her comb.

His heart stuttered in his chest.

She wasn't leaving.

70. Chapter 70: Caught in a Tangle

****Caught in a Tangle****

"Can I sit with you?"

Hiccup blinked, then put his prosthetic on the rock behind him and moved himself back. "Of course."

He looked around quickly. He was sitting in almost the same spot. Maybe they had gone back in time. Her movements were familiar, almost identical to last week. She climbed up on to the rock beside him, again sitting on his right, again unwinding her hair and beginning to pull her comb through it section by section. Maybe one of the gods had granted his wish.

But she glanced up at him, and her face still looked tense. A furrow

hovered between her eyebrows and there was sadness in her gaze before she looked back down at the stone beneath her.

Hiccup moved over and reached into his own bag, pulling out a small wrapped parcel.

"Hungry?"

"A little, why?"

He opened the cloth and placed it between them, revealing more slivers of the dried fruit he'd shared with her that morning.

"You have more?"

He nodded. "I traded for a bag of it."

"For me?" She still hadn't taken a piece. He looked at her, thinking that maybe she was asking more than one question, but not sure what the other question was. He nodded.

"I knew you'd like it when the traders gave me a sample." Astrid tilted her head and looked at him, her comb paused midway down the length of her hair.

Eventually she took a piece and looked down at it, then up at him with a faint smile. "Thank you."

He smiled back at her, and picked up his sketchbook, turning to a new page so he could try again to sketch a wooden dragon that didn't look too much like a dragon.

"How did you know I was going to be walking by your house this morning?"

"Sorry?"

"Were you waiting for me?"

Hiccup looked down at his notebook, at the charcoal he held a fraction of an inch above the surface. Might as well tell the truth.

"Yes. I saw you hike off with your axe, and you were gone awhile, so Iâ€¦decided to work there." He felt ridiculous, but he didn't want to lie to her, or hide the truth. He had been worried about her, though he'd kept telling himself he had no reason to be. "Where did you hike to?"

"No idea. I kept going and eventually found a field I hadn't been to before. Past the springs, around the western side of the mountain."

"That's pretty far," he said.

She shrugged. "I needed to think. Ouch." She pulled at her comb, which had become ensnared in a knot in her hair.

Astrid slid the comb free and began pulling the tangle apart with her fingers, frowning. "I threw my axe so much, my arms are still

aching."

Hiccup held himself still, uncertain. He knew he was the reason she'd been upset, that she'd thrown herself into exhaustion, but he selfishly wanted to know if she felt differently, now that she'd attacked some trees. He couldn't think of anything he could do or say to help, and feared anything he said would make her feel worse.

She picked up her comb again, this time sliding it smoothly through the hair she held in her fingers. Watching her comb her hair was as unsettling as it had been the previous week, if not more, but he couldn't look away. Astrid moved another section of her hair forward over her shoulder and began combing it slowly, starting from the ends and moving the comb up toward her face.

Then she looked over at him, and caught him staring.

Great.

He looked down at his notebook, mentally cursing himself.

"What are you working on this week?"

He glanced up at her, but he could feel that his ears and cheeks were red, so he looked back down. "Trying to draw the houses around the plaza."

She leaned closer, looking at the page beneath his hand. "Looks like you already did."

"No, they're not right," he said, pointing to one side of a house he'd drawn. "That side doesn't match this one, and the base of this house is actually wider, almost as wide as the wings of the dragon carving."

She frowned and looked closer. "What's this for?"

"Practice for the larger drawing - the one you saw this morning."

"Oh. For your dad?"

He nodded, trying again to draw the house, this time from a slightly different angle. She watched, and eventually laughed softly, a whisper of sound that he didn't recognize at first.

"What?"

"You'll probably say that drawing isn't right either for whatever reason," she gestured with her comb, unable to explain. Her head was bent forward, and she looked up at him, a smile on her face. "You'd find something wrong with it, that it wasn't exactly right, but it looks just like the house on the plaza to me."

He frowned, trying to puzzle out what she meant.

"Are you saying I'm a perfectionist?"

"No, no, not at all. Why would I say that?" Sarcasm, that he understood. She grinned at him, a smile that reached past her eyes

and filled her face.

He couldn't help smiling back at her before he started another sketch. He was adding details to the roofline and trying not to stare at her when he heard her growl. She was reaching behind her head, trying to divide a section of her hair and comb it out, but she dropped her arms into her lap.

"What's wrong?"

She scowled, but didn't answer.

"Are youâ€¦|what's wrong?"

"My arms hurt, and I can't reach far enough to comb out the hair behind me." She sounded so angry about it, so personally offended by her own soreness - soreness she'd caused - that he had to bite his lips to keep from laughing.

Then he stilled and stopped himself from speaking aloud the thought that had just entered his head.

Astrid swept her hair over her shoulder and tried to comb out the thick mass of it at once, but he could tell it wasn't working.

His heart was tripping over itself and a part of his mind was yelling at him to not even think about saying anything, because he would make things worse, but he spoke anyway.

"Can I help?"

71. Chapter 71: Untangling Choices

Chapter 71: Untangling Choices

Astrid looked at him, a slightly wary, almost vulnerable expression on her face, and he regretted the offer immediately. He opened his mouth to apologize, but froze when she handed him her comb.

Ok, then.

He could do this. No big deal.

Hiccup shifted to the right to sit behind her, and she slid to her left and pushed her hair over her shoulder so it fell down her back, a long curtain of tangled gold. He curled his right leg in front of him but then realized his left leg was at her side.

He should move. He shouldn't - maybe if he crossed his left leg at an angleâ€¦|.

Then Astrid put her hand gently on his left knee, above where his leg ended, disappeared with an abruptness that even now sometimes surprised Hiccup. He stilled.

"It's ok," she said, looking over her shoulder at him.

He held her gaze for a moment, and a smile moved across her face again like sunlight piercing through a dark grey cloud. Then she

turned away, and he picked up a section of her hair.

It was heavier than he expected, but soft and still warm from the springs, and he began combing the way she had, from the bottom, then higher, then higher still, until he could slide the comb slowly without pulling her hair or finding a snarl. He chose another section, moving carefully and slowly, not wanting to hurt her or break any of her hair.

"Thank you," she said quietly. She reached over his leg and took another piece of fruit.

He didn't respond, his attention on what he was doing, while also trying not to think too much about what her hair felt like in his hands, how close she was to him, how he wanted to do this for the rest of his life if he could manage not to mess everything up between right now and everything after.

He thought, somewhat randomly, of the night he'd been so exhausted caring for his father, and how Astrid had dropped through his bedroom window onto the floor. She'd known he needed to talk to someone, someone who would hear him. That hour in his room, just the two of them, talking quietly, he wanted to know it would happen again. He wanted that hour every night.

He wanted any hour with her, really. One conversation where his stomach wasn't in knots.

Then he thought of how Astrid had insisted, and how she'd been right, that he had needed someone to talk to that night who wasn't unconscious and snoring.

He slid the comb through another section of her hair and chose another, allowing the softness to cover his fingers as he separated it from the rest.

Maybe she needed the same.

Astrid took another piece of fruit, then shifted her position on the rock in front of him, curling her legs to the side.

"Astrid?"

"Yeah?"

"What's wrong? Why are you upset?" Can I help? Can I fix it? But he couldn't say that last part aloud.

She was quiet for a minute. He could see the muscles of her neck flexing as she ate, and the expanse of her back moving as she breathed in slowly, smooth and deep.

"Nothing's wrong."

He didn't answer her, because he disagreed. He wanted to hear what she thought.

"It's like there's this thing between us and I don't know how to talk about it."

"Thing?" It was a difficult word to interpret.

She stilled, and he moved another section over her shoulder. Her hair was keeping time for him, the smooth gold that had already been combed, and the waved and rippled chaos that hadn't yet. If he worked slowly, he'd have more time with her, to try to fix what went wrong.

"Are you angry?"

"No," she said almost immediately in response.

He moved a portion of hair over her shoulder, and moved on to the hair at the nape of her neck. It was finer, and a darker yellow. It rarely saw the sun, he supposed, hidden under her braid. He picked up the comb, but stopped. There was a big snarl near her nape, and if he used the comb, it would certainly pull and hurt.

He put the comb down on his leg and used his fingers to begin to split the tangle gently, pulling it apart little by little.

"Is there a big knot?" Astrid asked, holding her head still.

"Yeah," he replied. He glanced at her, but she was facing away from him, her chin down on her chest.

"If you get your knife, you can just cut it out."

No, he thought.

Aloud, he said, "It's nearly out - I don't need to cut it." His fingers moved the tangled pieces apart until he could begin to comb them in short, gentle pulls. Within a few moments, the tangle was gone, and her hair was smooth and shining in his hands.

"There," he said quietly, satisfied that he hadn't needed to get his knife. Then he took a breath and returned to his original question.

"Are you upset with me?"

She thought for a moment. "No, I'm not upset with you. Iâ€¦."

He listened, still combing carefully, not wanting to pull her hair or hurt her.

"I was so afraid when you told me about the proposal initially, when I thought you'd accepted it." He shook his head, but he didn't say anything.

"And that fearâ€¦ never went away, I guess."

"Why not?"

She looked over at the pile of gold fruit on the rock next to her. Her profile was outlined by the light from the sun cutting through the trees.

"I don't know. I feel likeâ€¦." She sat up straighter, and when she

spoke, her hands moved through the sunlight. "I feel like somebody's handed me a weapon, and it's huge and sharp and dangerous and I haven't used it before and I don't know what to do with it. I don't know what to do next."

Apparently most things involving Astrid also involved weapons. Hiccup watched the comb in his hands. He wouldn't necessarily describe how he felt about her as a weapon, but he understood what she meant.

"As long as you don't try to kill me," he said.

She laughed, a short sound that ended too soon.

"You can do whatever you want with it," he added. His throat tightened, but he continued. "Or."

"Or?"

"Or you can give it back, if you don't want it."

The only sound was the water's murmur from the springs and the conversation of birds in the trees around them. She didn't answer aloud.

But after a moment, she shook her head, a quick and wordless no.

Then she whispered, "No. No way."

Hiccup pushed her hair over her shoulder, and was about to begin combing another section when he noticed that her skin was flushed. Her neck and her ears were red, and, leaning a bit to the left, he looked at her face, which was turned toward her lap. Her face was red, too.

Having no idea what to do, or what to say, he picked up the comb, but then stopped. Her hair was mostly pushed to the side, and he could see the curve of her neck where it sloped down to meet her shoulder, a spot on his body that she had kissed a few times, and bitten on one occasion that he wasn't likely to forget, ever. Each time, a shock like lightning had gone through him, fire originating in that spot and burning him alive for a moment.

Would the same happen to her?

He moved the comb to his right hand, and after a moment's hesitation, he ran the back of his fingers along the warmth of her skin, gently following the curve until his fingers brushed the neckline of her tunic. She shivered, a faint movement he almost missed, and he lifted his hand again, this time allowing his fingertips to trace her skin, savoring the softness of it.

Then Astrid moved her hand back to his leg, his left leg, and he froze. Her fingers on his knee, brushing the hairs aside and moving over his skin, sent lightning through his body again, and he realized that it wasn't so much where she touched him, but that she touched him at all.

She shifted and turned to face him, her hand still on his knee. But instead of the wicked smile he expected, the one that warned him she

was about to do something unexpected, she looked scared.

He didn't want her to be fearful or sad, and he reached forward on instinct, moving his hand into her hair, brushing it away from her face.

She looked closely at his face, almost studying his features, and he began counting the shades of blue in her eyes, in case he didn't have the chance again.

"You chose me," Astrid said softly. It wasn't a question

"Yes." His answer wasn't a question, either. He had, and he would again, and he'd argue with anyone who tried to tell him he shouldn't, including Astrid herself.

"You wouldn't take that back."

"Never."

She opened her mouth to speak, but stopped. Then she smiled, and his entire body filled with warmth and relief at the sight of it.

"Me, neither."

He was about to say more but her next move was much better. She leaned forward and kissed him.

72. Chapter 72: Softness and Hunger

****Softness and Hunger****

Hiccup's left hand slid through the cascade of her hair, and he pulled her closer just as Astrid placed her hand on his chest, her fingers brushing his neck. Her fingertips met his skin and he broke away from her with a quiet gasp. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and lightning spread everywhere inside him.

He looked into her eyes. She was still smiling. Only this time, he saw the wicked tilt of her eyes just before she pushed him, pressing her hand against his skin until his back met the warm stone, and she moved over him, holding herself above him on her arms. Her hair fell over her shoulders around them like a veil, and he reached up and pulled her toward him, for the first time in his life feeling the weight of her body against his.

He was never going to breathe normally again in his life. Ever.

She was warmth and softness, strength and ferocious hunger as she kissed him, one hand sliding along his chest, the other beneath his head, in his hair, pulling him toward her, pulling herself closer to him.

He savored every part of her that touched him. He wanted to taste her skin, to know if the softness beneath her jaw, if the line leading to the curve her neck that made her shiver, was different from the space of her collarbone, or the side of her neck.

But he didn't move. The feast of her lips made his head spin, and he

wrapped one arm around her waist and slid the other farther into the curtain of her hair, tilting her head a fraction and deepening their kiss.

In the space between them, everything made sense. The world behind them was complicated, but beneath his hands and under her touch, between their mouths and within their breath, everything was simple and obvious and wonderful.

"You chose me," she whispered again, her mouth moving against his as she spoke. He looked up at her face above his, flushed and lit with happiness, and nodded.

"Yes."

"Thank you," she said, as she leaned down toward him again.

"Always," he said. "Just-"

She dropped a kiss on his mouth then moved away abruptly.

"Just what?"

"If you could not try to kill me-"

She started to laugh and dropped her forehead to his shoulder, tightening her grip within his hair and on his chest, which tickled and made him flinch.

"Or tickle me-" he said, then froze. Astrid had turned her head, and was sliding her lips along the side of his neck, and across his throat.

"You smell good," she whispered against his skin. He was jealous of her access when he had none, but he couldn't move so long as her teeth skimmed the edge of his collarbone.

Her mouth moved over his jaw, across his cheek, and he turned his head to capture her lips. Her body slid against his and he could no longer think straight. Everything in him had turned into touch and heat, lips and fire and incredible, almost painful joy.

Eventually, they moved apart, and she looked down at him. Her lips were slightly swollen, and she kept licking them with the tip of her tongue.

"So now what do we do?" Her voice was a rasp above a whisper.

"Now?"

"Yes."

Hiccup had several answers, but none that he could voice aloud or permit himself to think about. He looked up at her.

"Well, I need to comb your hair again."

Astrid laughed and sat up, curling her legs beside her and pulling

him up so he sat, this time facing her. She wrapped her arms around him and he moved her closer as she curved into his body, her head on his shoulder.

"You don't have to," she said.

He reached to the stone behind her for the comb.

"May I?"

She lifted her head and kissed him again, a touch of light and fire, then turned so he could reach her hair, which wasn't smooth any longer, but wasn't a mass of snarls, either.

The air around them became steadily more golden as the sun continued to set, and tiny droplets of water danced in the sunlight above the surface of the springs.

"You know," he said, trying to keep the smile from his voice. "If you just tell me what's bothering you, I might be able to help."

Astrid snorted, and elbowed him in the side, but he could see her smile.

"Someone really wise must have told you that," she replied.

"Yup," he agreed. "Maybe."

Hiccup drew the comb slowly through her hair. It was free of tangles, but he didn't want to stop, so he held her hair in one hand so she wouldn't feel how smoothly it slid through.

"Are you going to tell me what you needed my leg for?"

"Nope."

"Oh, come on," he said. "I let you run off andâ€¦ do whatever nefarious things you're planning?"

Astrid rested her hands in her lap and grinned at him over her shoulder.

Which gave him an idea, another he hadn't allowed himself earlier.

He swept her hair over her shoulder again, combing one last section, but when she turned toward the springs, watching the water, he moved. Instead of his fingertips, he ran his lips, then his teeth against the sloping curve of her neck, his hand moving around to her shoulder, slowly pressing her back toward him.

He tasted her neck, the soft skin behind her ear, and nipped the edge of his teeth along her jaw. She shuddered, pressing back towards him with a gasp. When he bit her on the nape of her neck, near where she'd bitten him weeks ago, she jumped and grabbed his leg, which made him jump as well.

Then Astrid spun towards him, put her hands on his face and kissed him. And she kept kissing him. Like she didn't intend to stop before the first frost.

Which was fine with Hiccup.

Three years might have gone by and he would not have noticed. His world was Astrid's mouth, her lips, and how they moved with his.

She nipped his lower lip, and he flinched. Her tongue slid over his and he burst into flame. He put whatever it was he had in his hands aside, and lifted her closer. Or she may have jumped. He couldn't be sure.

Because her knees were on either side of his hips, her hands were in his hair, and her mouth was above his. His lips moved on hers without inhibition. He pulled her to him, his hands on her waist, and through the fine weave of her shirt felt the curves and the impossible firmness of her muscles, the strength she had with her at all times. Unlike the last time he'd kissed her like this, in the forge, her skirt wasn't a threat. It was behind them, at the base of a boulder, so the only thing between them now was old cloth, worn soft and thin. So much of her was touching him, and everywhere her body met his burst into flame as she moved closer to him, then closer still.

He had never experienced anything so perfect in his life.

Astrid slowly lifted her head, looking down at him, a fraction of space between them.

They couldn't catch their breath, as if they'd run all the way back to Berk instead of merely kissing each other like the world was beginning on a flat rock in the late afternoon sun.

Hiccup was the first to smile.

"Any time you want to borrow my leg, just let me know."

She laughed, her head falling back, then wrapped her arms around him, holding him against her, her head next to his. Her hair covered his hands, and he closed his eyes, breathing in the knowledge that she was there.

Then she slid to her right, and sat down next to him. Reaching up, she gathered her hair to one side, and quickly wound it into a plait that rested over her shoulder.

"Leg up already so we can walk home."

"You sure you don't need it for anything else?"

She punched him, not lightly, but she smiled at him. The stinging in his arm, despite how wickedly strong she was, was nothing compared to the almost painful joy he felt seeing her smile at him again.

He strapped on his leg, not caring that she watched, and pulled on his shirt. They jumped down and walked back to Berk together.

73. Chapter 73: Sharing What is Seen

****Sharing What Is Seen****

The week was busy for everyone, with flying and training, council meetings and tribal discussions about Mornen's garden, their planting, and the increased number of dragon riders in Berk. But each afternoon, as the sun began to move closer to the horizon and away from the sky, Hiccup and Astrid, plus Fishlegs and sometimes the twins and Snotlout, would gather on the grass by the chief's house. Hiccup was still working on his large drawing, but he always had snacks, so they met each afternoon to talk about the day, what they had left to do, and what they planned to accomplish tomorrow.

Snotlout and Fishlegs debated the need for more aggressive flight training, with more weaponry. Hiccup added nothing to that conversation, and demonstrated zero interest in giving them any new weapons. Astrid hid her smile behind her hand as she sat next to Hiccup. She knew there were more weapons, but she also knew Hiccup wasn't planning on handing them over yet, so she said nothing. She had her axe, so they could figure themselves out on their own. Hiccup glanced at her, a twist of a smile on his face, and she moved her hand to let him see her grin as she ate the last of the dried fruit.

Hiccup's drawing filled nearly the entire page, and captured every part of Berk visible from his front steps. Astrid loved watching him fill in each piece, still amazed at his ability to draw what he saw, and what he thought, so accurately. She'd seen him draw maps, pictures of Toothless, multiple images for the Book of Dragons, and even pictures of her and the others, and she'd found his sketches that night in the forge. She knew about his talent, but it astonished her every time she saw it.

She peeked over his arm and moved closer so she could see more. Amazing. The houses looked identical to the homes in front of them, and the plaza, the buildings and the path down to the docks curved through the picture as if she could jump in and wander off down the page.

But the best parts were the hidden pieces of Berk that he was adding in one by one. Behind a house, the curve of Hookfang's tail cast a shadow, and his head peeked from the other side of the building. Ruffnut's helmet and the horns of Tuffnut's were visible behind the stable, as if they were sneaking in to do something that they probably shouldn't be doing. Hoark and Fishlegs were tiny dots on the far hills, walking toward the water together. Every person and every dragon in Berk was hidden in the picture, and each time she looked at it, Astrid discovered another person, another dragon, in the village.

Tuffnut stood up and took a look at the board on Hiccup's lap before heading down to the stables to feed Barf and Belch.

"I think it's upside down," he said with a wide grin.

"Thanks. I'll fix that," Hiccup replied with a smile, though he didn't look up.

"Later, Hiccup," Ruffnut said, as she followed her brother down the path to the village.

Fishlegs and Snotlout were still reclined on the grass in front of

them, but their debate about the best weapon continued. Astrid looked at the drawing again, still not finding what she wanted.

"What's wrong?"

She frowned, but didn't answer. She looked closer at the picture, following each line, looking at each section closely.

"What are you looking for?" Hiccup sat up and looked at her.

She glanced at him. "I see nearly everybody, butâ€¦where am I?"

"You're right here," he said, gesturing with the blunt end of his pencil to the border on the right side of the page.

"Wait, really? Where?"

"Right here," he said, spinning the pencil in his hand and retracing one of the curving lines that made the right border of the image. He'd drawn a frame on all the edges of the paper, but each was different. The left border was one of the rock cliffs, and the top border was the sea, but the right was all waves and lines, like the carvings alongside his door.

"I don't see it," she said. Then she looked closer and gasped.

"It's my hair," she said quietly. The curving lines that ran along the side were really the edge of her braid, as if it were over her shoulder the way it was at that moment.

"Yes. You're here. You're next to me," he finished quietly.

"So, this is how you see Berk," she said.

"Yeah, pretty much," he replied, leaning over to fill in a shadow beneath Stormfly's wing, which peeked from behind the feeding station. Astrid noticed her axe was resting against her home behind Stormfly, a tiny handful of lines that somehow managed to be a perfect, miniature replica.

"Where is Toothless?"

"He's on the roof, behind me. Behind us."

"So he's not in the picture?"

"Not yet."

"How are you going to add him?"

"Not sure."

She folded her arms on her knees and rested her chin on her hand. "You'll figure it out. You always do," she said.

He grinned at her, then turned back to the paper.

"When are you going to give it to him?"

"Not sure about that either."

"You should give it to him at the party," Astrid said. Hiccup shook his head.

"No, no. That's too - I'll give it to him here, most likely."

"Hiccup, you should share this with everyone," she argued. He shrugged in reply and kept drawing.

...

In the end, he didn't need to decide. His father found the drawing on the table a few days later when he came home early the afternoon of his birthday. The village was already gathered in the great hall, which was filled with food and drinks, and Hiccup had figured he'd find his father there later.

But Stoick had come home instead, and Hiccup heard him as he walked in and then stopped just inside the doorway. Hiccup had come rushing down the stairs from his room to stop his father from seeing the drawing on the table, but it was too late. He'd just finished mounting the paper on a large flat piece of wood that he'd sanded to smoothness and had planned to leave it in his father's chamber.

"What is this?" Stoick said, soft wonder in his voice as he approached the table.

"Uh, yeah. Happy, um, happy birthday, Dad." Hiccup slowly descended the last three steps, one hand rubbing his hair.

Stoick had picked up the picture and was holding it at arms length. Then he brought it closer to his face, looking intently at the detail, then moved it away again.

"It's Berk," he said eventually, his voice still soft.

"Yeah," Hiccup said, moving closer, looking over his father's arm. Of course, now he could see a few thousand things he wanted to fix. Oh, well.

"This is Berk, right now," Stoick said. Hiccup nodded.

"With everyone." Hiccup didn't know what to say in response.

"There's Gobber," Stoick said softly, looking closer at the tiny image of Gobber outside the forge, arms in the air as if he were yelling about something.

"And there I am," Stoick continued. Hiccup had drawn his father standing outside the great hall, his arms folded over his chest, watching the village below him. He was smiling in the picture, and he wore the same smile when he saw it.

"You drew this." It wasn't a question.

Maybe a sword would have been better, Hiccup thought to himself. He

looked down at the ground.

"Yeah," he answered. "I did."

He heard the wood in his father's hand knock softly against the surface of the table and looked up. Stoick held the drawing up in one hand, the lower edge propped up on the table. He placed the other hand on Hiccup's shoulder.

Hiccup froze.

Stoick looked at the drawing with wonder and awe on his face. Then he looked at his son with the same expression.

"Thank you, son," he said, in a low, almost shaken voice. "This isâ€¦thank you."

Hiccup shrugged his other shoulder. "You're welcome. Happy birthday," he said again.

Then, to Hiccup's surprise, Stoick lifted his hand, and while looking at the drawing again, picking out more hidden vikings and dragons in the image, he placed his hand on Hiccup's head, smoothing his hair slowly, then bringing him closer.

Hiccup moved towards his dad, looking at the picture with him. It had turned out close to what he had wanted. Every viking in Berk was hidden in the image somewhere, along with most of the dragons. He tried not to find more things he wanted to fix.

"Let's go, then," Stoick said after a moment.

Hiccup nodded.

"Just wait until everyone sees this," Stoick continued, lifting the board into his arms and turning toward the door.

Hiccup looked up at his father with a laugh. Astrid was right.

74. Chapter 74: Following Orders

****Following Orders****

When they arrived at Meade Hall, the noise was already deafening, but it swelled when people saw Stoick and Hiccup enter. The floors groaned under the weight of so much food and increasing viking merriment. The entire village waited inside to celebrate.

Stoick leaned the drawing against the wall where the light from the giant fire in the center of the room reached the page, and throughout the evening, voices were heard exclaiming, "That's me! I'm in there!" Others called to friends that they'd found their child, or their spouse, or their dragon, hiding in Hiccup's picture of Berk. Then they came over to Hiccup, thanking him, or commending him for his gift and his talent. The admiration and excitement, the approval from each person was warmer than the fire, and made Hiccup turn increasingly red.

He figured his face would be burning for most of the evening, but it

probably didn't matter. The more people drank, the more their faces would be red, too.

Gobber found him at the food table, filling a plate. He was wearing his giant mug attachment, a cup larger than his head able to hold an enormous amount of mead. His face was nearly purple and he wasn't standing quite upright.

But he stilled and placed his hand on Hiccup's shoulder, looking into his eyes and blinking slowly. "Well done, lad."

"Thanks, Gobber," Hiccup said, then watched as Gobber staggered off, half singing and half muttering. It was going to be a long party.

He ate standing up, because there wasn't much room at the tables and because while he knew room would be made for him to join any group, he was hungry and wanted to eat. He stood on the other side of the room from the picture, watching people wander past and seeing each of them smile when they found themselves or someone they knew.

Definitely better than a sword, he thought to himself.

Once those who played instruments had eaten, the music began. It would continue all night, with singing, dancing, and spontaneous and often bawdy stories about Stoick, the tribe, and their history. Berk had Thawfest and Snoggletog, and those traditions endured before and long after the current chieftain. But the chieftain's birthday was also a celebration of Berk just as much as the other holidays, because each year, they were present to celebrate and thank the chief for all he did to keep Berk safe and whole. There would be stories of Stoick's ascension to the chieftaindom, of his battles against the dragons - though the bloodthirsty rage of these tales had softened considerably over the past few years. Instead of ending with vows to conquer and kill, the stories ended with the peaceful friendship of the dragons they'd fought, a battle that ended much better than they'd anticipated.

Hiccup heard the musicians picking up their instruments and crossed the room to grab two mugs, though he filled them with different things.

As he wandered the room to find a place to sit for awhile and watch the party, he felt someone grab onto his leg. Expecting to see a dragon, he was surprised to find Eira, the younger sister of one of the academy students, holding onto him. She'd been wise enough to grab his right leg instead of his left, so he stopped without spilling anything on her head.

"Want to ride _dragon_!"

She was probably two, maybe three, and loud as any viking in the room.

"Ok," Hiccup said slowly. Then a voice came from behind him.

"If you don't ask politely, no one will take you flying, Eira," Fishlegs said. He picked her up and put her on his shoulder, which made her clap and smile.

Hiccup looked up at her and she glared, leaned forward, and pointed a small chubby fist at him. "Fly dragon, now!"

"Eira!" Fishlegs began to move her off his shoulder, and she reached down and grabbed his fur vest with both hands. Her voice wasn't any quieter, though.

"Fly dragon now PLEASE."

Fishlegs rolled his eyes at Hiccup, leaving Eira hanging onto his vest, then his hair as she maintained her perch high above them both. "I took her up on Meatlug, and she hasn't stopped wanting to go flying since."

"I know the feeling," Hiccup said to Eira, who grinned for a moment but then scowled at him again.

"Eira, let's go find your mom. She's probably looking for you." Eira refused, grabbing Fishlegs' hair.

"How about this," Hiccup said. "I have to go flying around Berk tomorrow morning. If your mother says it's ok, you can come with me."

Eira's face lit up and she started to bounce on Fishlegs' shoulder, which looked somewhat painful.

"But you have to do everything I say, and you have to listen to Toothless and to me."

Eira nodded and threatened to leap off Fishlegs onto Hiccup, except Hiccup was still holding two full mugs and had no way to grab her. Fishlegs scooped her off his shoulder and held her under his arm like he would a basket of fish. He carried her off across the room, and Hiccup watched Eira kick her legs and try to escape, without success.

...

An hour or so later, Astrid found Hiccup sitting on a table, leaning his back against the stone wall behind him.

"You were right," he said in greeting. She jumped up onto the table beside him.

"I was?"

"About giving my dad the drawing." He nodded across the room where the wood rested against the wall, still attracting a steady stream of people eager to look closely at each part of it. "He brought it here right after I gave it to him. You were right."

"Well, that takes the fun out of saying I told you so," she growled at him, then smiled.

He passed her a cup.

"What's this?"

"Honey mead."

"For me?"

He nodded as she took the cup from him. "But it's all gone," she said.

"It is. I saved you some."

She smiled and moved to sit next to him, her back against the stone next to his, her braid over her shoulder between them. "Thanks. Sorry I'm late."

He shrugged. She was there now.

She took a long drink, then curled her legs under her, leaning closer to him. She was wearing a long sleeved shirt he'd never seen before, with embroidery along the neck and collar, and more by her hands. Her braid was loose over her shoulder, with strands framing her face on both sides, and she wasn't wearing her shoulder armor or her gauntlets.

Hiccup kept looking at her, taking in one detail at a time, then looking away, at the crowd, or the fire, or at his father, who was slowly making his way around the room. Astrid looked beautiful, so much so that he wasn't able to take in all the changes at once.

She sipped her drink and ate some of the food Hiccup had saved for her while they talked about the party, the drawing, and the fact that Astrid was confident she was going to beat him racing the next day. Hiccup relaxed, watching Astrid's hands move as she talked, wondering if she'd made all the intricate stitches that decorated the edge of her sleeve.

Then he looked up and saw his father standing in front of him.

Astrid sat up straight and lowered her cup.

"Happy birthday, sir," she said with a smile.

"Thank you. And thank you for being part of my gift from Hiccup."

Astrid blinked at him, confused.

"Dadâ€¦." He gave his father a look of warning. Stoick gave him one back, but it was wobbly on the edges. His father had enjoyed more than a few mugs of mead and ale and his glare didn't carry its normal intimidating weight. Plus, when Stoick's dissolved into a grin, Hiccup realized his father was genuinely happy and completely at ease, a rare combination.

"Don't forgot to patrol tonight, either of you."

Hiccup looked at him, confused. Stoick laughed, then strolled away when someone called his name from across the room.

"Did your dad just tell us to go patrol the village?"

"I guess so," he said, still watching his father wander toward the

fire.

"Well, let me finish my drink, and we'll go."

Hiccup looked at her. She lowered the mug from her face, and a wicked grin appeared behind it.

"Chief's orders," she said.

Hiccup shook his head, and eventually smiled. "Can't argue with that."

75. Chapter 75: Racing Away, Racing Home

****Racing Away, Racing Home****

They left the great hall separately, and agreed to meet at the stables. Stoick may have told them to go on patrol, but there was no need to invite trouble by being too obvious.

Astrid beat Hiccup to the stables and was saddling Stormfly when she heard Toothless land outside the building.

She heard Toothless call to Stormfly, a noise that sounded to Astrid very much like dragon teasing. Stormfly seemed to agree, because she shook her quills and nudged Astrid with her wing.

"Ready to fly?" She moved alongside her dragon, expecting to see Hiccup walking into the stable. Instead she heard his voice from above, through the windows.

"Already ahead of you - see if you can catch up!"

"Let's go, girl. Let's catch ourselves a Night Fury," she said, leaping into her saddle and leaning over Stormfly's head. Stormfly shook her head, squawked into the air, and launched herself out the door and into the sky.

Toothless was flying over the academy, looping out toward the sea when they caught up. They chased one another, their dragons flying higher into the air, riding the currents of the wind, then plummeting down toward the ocean and skimming the tips of their wings across the water. Hiccup tilted on Toothless so his wing pressed into the sea at an angle and sprayed Stormfly's legs with water.

"Hey! No splashing!" Astrid yelled.

Hiccup laughed, and they flew up into the air over the sea, heading away from Berk to the east, then turning back to fly over the island and the water surrounding it.

As they hovered over Berk, they looked around the village - which was pretty easy, given that every other viking aside from themselves was in the great hall. The paths and the plaza were empty, and there were few fires burning since no one would be around to tend them for the next few hours - or several hours. The chief's birthday tended to be an all-night party, or close to it.

"Well, this will be a rather short patrol," Hiccup said. "Nobody in

the village, and no ships in sight on the water, either."

Astrid nodded. "It's a good night for flying though," she replied. The air was clear, and the curved moon lit the water and the village just enough to see each building clearly from the air. The light washed across the ocean in broken ripples, uninterrupted by any clouds.

As they flew slowly around the village, they could hear the noise of the party coming from the great hall. The doors were propped open, and the light from inside spilled onto the grass and the stairs, along with the shadows of the people inside laughing, eating, and dancing.

Astrid looked at the doorway for a moment, and realized that, despite looking forward to the gathering all week, she'd rather be up in the air than down below, and she didn't want to go back any time soon.

"Hey, Hiccup!" He turned to look at her, and she grinned at him. "Race you to the cove."

"You're on."

...

Somehow, and she wasn't sure exactly how, she beat him. It might have been that she flew low and fast across the tops of the trees, knowing that Stormfly would be able to dodge the highest branches while Toothless would fly a bit higher above them to avoid getting any part of his harness caught. Maybe she won because she had a bit of a head start, but Toothless had better acceleration in the air than Stormfly.

She landed on the grass and flipped herself off Stormfly's back as Hiccup circled the cove and landed.

She looked up. Maybe Hiccup let her win.

That didn't seem likely. But -

"Did you let me win?"

Hiccup gaped at her. He was sitting in his saddle, looking down at her as she walked over and began to rub Toothless' nose. "So not only do you beat me, but you insult me, too?"

She smiled at him, unashamed.

"No, you beat me."

"That's a little odd."

Hiccup shrugged and detached his leg, then jumped down beside her.

Toothless nudged her hand with his nose. She'd stopped moving when Hiccup had stood up in the saddle, and forgot that her hand was expected to rub Toothless' nose and scratch under his chin. "Sorry, Toothless."

He grunted at her. Hiccup leaned against his dragon and adjusted his leg, hopping on one foot for a minute, then pushing his left leg down into the prosthesis.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing," he looked up at her, then down at his leg. "I made adjustments to the fit at the top and it's not quite right yet."

"Huh." Astrid scratched Toothless' chin, and he purred, his tongue hanging out. Stormfly took exception to Astrid's attentions and pushed her nose in between them.

"Uh, oh," Astrid said with a laugh. "I'm done now, Toothless." The two dragons chased one another around the cove, dodging mock bites and jumping over tails, crowing and growling until the sound of their pretend fight echoed off the walls.

"So, what do I win?"

Hiccup looked away from the dragon battle of fury and loudness and grinned at her. "I don't know, what do you win? Bragging rights?"

"Nah, I have those anyway," she said, her hands behind her back as she walked toward him. He watched her with a slight frown, but didn't step back.

Suddenly Stormfly ran between them, nearly knocking Astrid into the water, and Toothless leaped over them both, chasing Stormfly. Toothless landed easily alongside her, and the two dragons pushed each other toward the water, nipping at one another's tails and blocking each other's access to the pond.

"Get him, girl! Don't let him push you around!" Astrid's voice echoed through the cove, followed immediately by Hiccup's laughter.

"Like anyone could push her around," he said, still laughing.

Astrid looked up at the sky, at the profusion of stars scattered across the darkness above them. The light of the moon was dim in the cove, but the longer they stood, the more she could see. There were the rocks, and the edge of the pond behind her. Stormfly and Toothless called a truce and drank from the pond, and when she turned again to watch them, she froze.

She knew this spot. She was standing where they'd landed years ago, after the first time she'd flown on a dragon. It was where Hiccup had stopped her from running back to Berk, where he had stood up to her, and she'd seen a hint of the chief he would be one day. Where she'd kissed him for the first time.

She knew what she wanted as her prize. Well, she'd already known, but hadn't been sure she'd have the courage to ask. Asking first wasâ€¦ not her usual course of action. But now... now she was sure.

Hiccup was watching her, a curious expression on his face.

"I know what I claim as my prize."

He put his hands on his hips, looking impatient, but she could see he was holding in a smile. She stepped in front of him, close but not touching, and watched his face.

"Let me guess," he said, moving one hand and rubbing his chin. He leaned closer, and when his face was a fraction of space from hers, he whispered, "You want me to drop you in a treetop again?"

Astrid narrowed her eyes. "No. Not ever."

He laughed. "Hey, it got you to listen to me."

"There are far better ways," she said. It was her turn to hold in a smile.

Then he reached up brushed her hair from her face, looking at her in a way that made her shiver inside.

She moved toward him, past his hand and into the space beneath his arm, and kissed him.

His arm closed around her, pressing her against his body, and with his other hand, he lightly traced the curve of her cheek before tilting her face toward him and deepening their kiss.

She clutched his shirt with both hands, pulling him closer, then slid her palms down to the hem of his shirt and beneath it.

He jerked away from her with a gasp. "My gods, Astrid. Your hands are freezing!"

She laughed, but then stopped when he took each of her hands in his and moved them around his sides, placing them beneath his shirt and onto his back. It brought her fully against him, and warmed her, too. His skin was like fire beneath her fingertips when he kissed her again.

Stormfly's call and Toothless' growl made them look over at their dragons, who had ceased fighting and were now sitting on the grass, waiting for them.

"Time to head back," she said. It wasn't a question. She knew as well as he did that they couldn't stay out for too much longer. The village wasn't so big that her absence wouldn't be noticed, and his absence definitely would.

He nodded, then pulled her closer again. She wasn't expecting it and she gasped, then fell silent as he kissed her once more.

â€¦

When they landed in the plaza a few minutes later, Astrid was sorry to jump down off her saddle onto the ground. Maybe she should develop a regular schedule of night patrols, and assign them to different pairs of riders. She turned to ask Hiccup about it, but he'd flown up to his house so Toothless could go up to his room if he wanted. Stormfly nudged Astrid toward the great hall, and turned to her own

bed for the night.

"Good night, girl. Sleep well."

As she walked up to the long stairs, she saw Toothless following Hiccup back toward the party.

Hiccup shrugged. "He wanted to come."

"Think we can walk in together?" He looked at the door and back at her.

"What's the worst that could happen?" Then he gave her the slightly tilted half smile that made her think for a moment about dragging him back to the cove. She laughed, and went inside when he held the door for her.

They separated as the crowd swept them in different directions. Hiccup skirted the wall to avoid falling down amid much drunken viking singing, which involved arm gestures in unpredictable directions. Astrid lost sight of him when she was pulled into a dance with Tuffnut. She laughed as he swung her in circles, barely missing his sister, who was dancing with Snotlout and looking somewhat horrified. Toothless stayed by the door, laying down as children climbed onto his back and pretended to fly, and eating the pieces of fish they snuck over to him. No wonder he followed Hiccup to the party, she thought.

Eventually, after dancing with Tuffnut and stopping for a drink, she saw Hiccup in the crowd and made her way over to him. He was leaning against the wall near his drawing, and he watched her walk towards him with a smile on his face that did strange things to her insides. It was the familiar half grin she loved, but there was something different about it. It was sharper, with an edge—| an edge that she liked.

She leaned against the wall next to him, and he slid his hand along the inside of her arm, over the thin material of her blouse and down, then interlaced his fingers through hers for a moment before letting go.

Then she remembered what she'd meant to ask him.

"You never told me where Toothless was," she said.

"Toothless? He's by the door, last time I saw him."

"No, no - in the drawing."

"Oh," he said, pushing away from the wall and turning toward the paper. Snotlout staggered up to them.

"I like this picture," he said, slurring his words only a little. "I found me, and Hookfang, and my dad. But where are you, Astrid?"

Astrid nudged Hiccup with her arm. "I know where I am, but I'm not telling."

Snotlout grunted at her, and looked closer at the page, squinting,

unable to hold himself still.

"I'll figure it out," he said. "Later." Then he wandered off, meandering side to side like he was aboard a ship in unstable seas.

"His head is going to hurt tomorrow," Hiccup said.

"Is that why you don't drink mead?"

"Nah. I don't like it much, that's all."

She turned to the drawing again. "So, where is Toothless?"

"Not telling," he said, trying not to smile and failing at it.

"You're not going to tell me?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"It's a surprise."

She glared at him, but couldn't stay angry. She put her arm around his waist and leaned against him for a moment, trying once again to find any trace of Toothless in the picture. Hiccup rested his arm on her shoulder until she moved away.

She'd find out eventually.

76. Chapter 76: Repairs and New Beginnings

****Repairs and New Beginnings****

The next day, it poured like the gods each had a bucket that never ran dry. Rain fell relentlessly from the moment the first villagers woke up, many if not all with aching heads and sleepy smiles left over from the night before. As a result, most everyone stayed indoors. There was never any shortage of work to do.

Not for the first time Hiccup was glad he worked at the forge. He'd hated the monotony of it at first, and had seen it as a sort of confinement, a location on the edge of the village that held him back. Then he'd learned how to use everything around him.

Now, on rainy days, he might have missed flying, but he had several fires surrounding him, and, once the day's chores were done, and any weapons or tools waiting for attention were sharpened and fixed, he could work on his own inventions in warmth and semi-privacy.

Gobber slowly gave him more and more time on his own, and asked about what he was working on, sometimes giving suggestions that were more helpful than Hiccup expected.

That day, as the rain fell in sheets and poured off the roof like a waterfall, he was working on another drawing. His desk was just large enough for one of the sheets of paper he'd bought, and he held the

edges down with pieces of metal when the rain and meandering wind threatened to curl the edges up while he worked. Unlike the one he did for his father, he had to stand to draw this one, and he took breaks to adjust his leg, another subject on which Gobber was very helpful.

"Tight again?"

"Yeah. Not sure if it's the weather or what, but I can't get the fit right."

"I had that problem," Gobber said, combing his mustache with a wire brush and adding another ring of metal to the right side. Hiccup had no idea how he prevented his whiskers from catching fire, but they were longer than ever, with not even a mild sign of scorching.

"What did you do?"

"Built another leg," Gobber answered, wandering over to where Hiccup stood.

Hiccup shook his head.

"Not sure I have time for that," he said.

"Let's have a look. Maybe we can fix it now," Gobber said, reaching out with his hand. Hiccup sat on a table and disconnected his prosthesis and handed it to Gobber, then leaned down to rub the edge of his leg and feel for any dampness. Gobber crouched low and peeked at the skin.

"Looks good," he said. "No bruises or anything. Does it hurt bad?"

"No, mostly just aching, if I stand too long or something."

Gobber nodded. "Could be the weather. But let's see what we can do with the cuff, here."

Gobber put Hiccup's leg down and made a circuit of the room collecting tools and pieces of metal and wood, then placed them on the table next to Hiccup. He pulled up a stool and, heads together, they got to work, figuring out whether the cuff could be tightened, or if a new one had to be made.

They'd disassembled the top and were inspecting the parts when Astrid walked in.

Gobber shot to his feet when he saw her and started picking up pieces to try to reassemble them quickly. She frowned at him, and looked at Hiccup. Hiccup reached over to touch Gobber's arm.

He shook his head at him, and smiled. "It's fine," Hiccup said in a quiet voice. "No big deal."

Gobber's eyes narrowed as he glanced at Astrid, but he nodded. "Aye. What can I do for you, then, Astrid?"

"Got a hammer?"

"No, sorry. We don't have any hammers here," Hiccup replied in a dry voice, making Gobber snort.

"Be quiet, you," Astrid said, pretending to glare at him.

"What size you need, lass?"

"I need to hammer a few bolts into the wall in the stables."

"I have just the thing," Gobber said, going into the storage room.
"Don't go anywhere, Hiccup."

Hiccup shook his head. "Not planning to."

Astrid wandered closer to the table where Hiccup sat, his leg in pieces beside him. He spun on the table so he faced her, and she smiled up at him.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, you know, small leg repair, typical forge work," he said.

"Trying to make yourself taller?"

"I'm taller than you, so I'm good."

"You could make yourself taller than your dad," she said, picking up one of the pieces, a ring of metal that circled the lower edge of the cuff. She held it across the palm of her hand, looking down at it.

"I don't think we have enough metal to make anyone that tall."

She laughed as Gobber returned with two hammers, one slightly bigger than the other.

"Bring them back when you're done, but no hurry," he said, handing them to her.

"Thanks, Gobber. See you later, Hiccup," she said as she placed the circle back on the table and left.

Gobber sat down at the table and picked up the small lever he was using to adjust the collar of Hiccup's prosthetic. He looked down at the piece in his hand, then up at Hiccup, who had picked up the lower half of his leg and was looking closely the mechanism that switched between the spear and the walking foot.

Gobber glanced out the door where Astrid had gone, then back up at Hiccup. Hiccup looked at him with a frown.

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," Gobber replied, his quick smile setting his mustache swinging as they got back to work.

â€

The following morning was damp, but clear and beautiful. The sun rose

behind a low bank of clouds, and the sky was gold and pink when Hiccup and Toothless took Eira for her promised flight into the sky. Her mother, Ragna, had seemed perfectly content to attach her daughter to a dragon's saddle and watch her take off into the air above Berk. But Hiccup was holding tight to Eira's harness, and Toothless glanced back over his shoulder at Eira and at Hiccup as they flew.

Eira had both arms in the air and was yelling the entire time.

"Is that a battle cry?"

Eira laughed and put her arms out to the side as Toothless turned and flew low over the water.

"See anyone at the docks, Eira?" She shook her head and pointed one hand up in the air.

"Higher! Higher nowâ€¦please!" Toothless growled happily and flapped his wings until they were high above Berk, circling over the southern side of the village.

"Wave to your mother," Hiccup said, signaling that they were ok. Eira waved with both arms and yelled down to her mother a stream of unintelligible shrieks. Her mother smiled and shook her head as she stood in the plaza watching them.

Toothless turned to the west and began a slow flight along the cliffs before turning out to sea.

â€¦

Astrid noticed Ragna looking out at the water and wandered over to ask if she was ok. Then she saw Toothless hanging in the air, coasting above the water in the northern sky.

Ragna greeted Astrid and smiled. "Eira got her wish to fly on a dragon."

"Is she up there?"

"Aye, with Hiccup."

Then Astrid saw Eira's tiny arms press out to the side as she pretended to fly like Toothless.

Ragna laughed. "She'll never want to come down."

"I know that feeling. Have you ever flown on a dragon?"

"Ah, no, not me," Ragna shook her head. "Too afraid of heights. Barely opened my eyes during Mornen's flight, if you'll pardon my saying so."

Astrid shook her head, not offended in the least.

"Flying's not for me," Ragna continued. "But Eira, she's going to be in your academy as soon as she's allowed, probably before then, if she has her way."

Astrid smiled at Ragna. "She'll be a great student if she loves flying this much already."

"Aye, that she does." Ragna kept her eyes on the dragon that carried her daughter as Toothless spread his wings wide and coasted above the water, almost holding still in the air.

Astrid could see Eira pointing out different parts of Berk, and Hiccup nodding, one hand on the saddle and the other around Eira. Was he asking her questions? What was he doing up there, hanging in the air above the village?

But she didn't speak her thoughts out loud, not wanting to worry Ragna.

Ragna broke the silence and said, "He's not flown as high as I expected, and he's stayed in sight."

"Hiccup? He wouldn't want to scare you, or Eira."

"Aye, I know. I don't worry about him at all. But that's my heart flying on the back of that dragon. So, I worry."

Astrid nodded, but didn't reply.

77. Chapter 77: Hiding and Seeking

****Hiding and Seeking****

Astrid didn't wait in the plaza for Toothless to land. She had been on her way to fetch something for her aunt, and had to hurry back to her house before Hiccup and Toothless landed to return Eira to her mother. Then she was expected at the academy, where a group of students were flying out with her to play hide and seek, an exercise which Stormfly loved. Astrid and Stormfly would hide, hanging by dragon claws upside down under rock bridges, perched behind boulders, or even hovering between or under trees, and the students had to try to find them as silently as possible. Any noise, and they had to sit out that round.

The students who could fly silently and find Astrid and Stormfly won a point, and the rider and dragon team with the most points at the end won sweets and dried fish, respectively. Well, no rider had chosen the dried fish for themselves yet, Astrid thought with a smile as she flew the group south past the springs and over the forest toward the bay.

The group settled at their starting point, one of the rock finger islands jutting up from the sea, and began the countdown that gave Astrid time to fly off and hide.

"Where shall we go this time, girl?" Stormfly squawked and turned toward Berk, which was a bit strange. But Astrid allowed her to lead, figuring that Stormfly had found a good hiding place.

She didn't expect to fly over a clearing and see Tuffnut and Hiccup fighting one another, each with a wooden staff.

"What theâ€¦?"

Astrid murmured directions to Stormfly, and she flew low and landed on a cliff behind a boulder. The spot was a below-average hiding place, not nearly as challenging as one Astrid would have chosen otherwise, but it offered an excellent view of the clearing.

Both Hiccup and Tuffnut had their shirts off, and were dueling with long wooden staffs. Tuffnut usually carried a staff with blades at both ends, but he had removed them. Even without, though, he was still a formidable opponent, not only because he was talented at offensive maneuvers with a wooden pole that was taller than he was, but because he talked incessantly and tended to annoy his opponent into making a sloppy move. Astrid hated dueling with Tuffnut for that reason.

Hiccup wasn't distracted, not that Astrid could see. Stormfly sat down and curled her wings around her belly, lowering her head so Astrid had a clear view of the two of them far below. If they looked up, they'd be able to see her, but it didn't seem likely that they would.

Astrid glanced quickly at the boulder beside her, making sure it hid as much of Stormfly's body as possible, then looked back at the field below them.

Tuffnut's movements were brutal and fluid, not giving Hiccup any opportunity to strike. But Hiccup held his defense and gave Tuffnut very little ground. He kept his prosthetic leg behind him, out of reach of Tuffnut's staff, and parried each twist and thrust, maintaining his boundary.

Both were sweating, and had clearly been practicing for some time. At least, she thought it was practice. Tuffnut didn't look genuinely angry, and Hiccup didn't have any reason to challenge Tuffnut that she knew of. Tuffnut was definitely talking, too. She could see Hiccup's lips moving as he answered. When they broke apart for a moment while laughing, Astrid relaxed - then sat forward in her saddle, leaning closer when they began again.

This time, Hiccup had the advantage, pivoting on his leg and ducking below Tuffnut's parry to try to sweep his legs from under him. Tuffnut jumped and yelled, and doubled his efforts, leaping around Hiccup so he now faced Astrid, and Hiccup turned away.

Hiccup's back had a wealth of freckles, and was covered in a sheen that reflected the sun. Astrid watched the flex and ripple of his muscles as he fought Tuffnut, at one point driving him back a step before resuming his defensive posture. He had dimples at the base of his spine, and the waistband of his leggings was slightly loose.

She closed her eyes and scolded herself, then refocused on the mock battle below her. Or tried to. Hiccup had more endurance than Tuffnut, though Tuffnut had more skill. And again, just as she had a few hours ago when she'd watched him hover over the sea north of Berk, she wondered what in Thor's name Hiccup was doing.

Whatever it was, it was fun to watch. She smiled a little as Tuffnut swept his staff in an attempt to trip Hiccup, which Hiccup avoided by jumping and then landing on his right leg, pivoting again and sweeping his prosthetic to try to knock Tuffnut's legs from under

him.

"Hey! No fair! I don't have a metal leg!" The sound of Tuffnut's indignation reached Astrid, and she snorted. She could hear Hiccup laughing.

Then they stopped for a moment. Tuffnut explained something, talking with his hands and his staff while Hiccup reached over and grabbed a canteen from the grass. He took a long drink, and then poured some of the water over his head.

She closed her eyes again. She really needed to stop watching this. And she needed to find her students, or let them find her. But when she sat up to fly away from the cliff, a smaller Nadder landed on the boulder above her head.

"Found you!" A triumphant call echoed across the cliff wall, and as she and Stormfly flew away, she saw Hiccup and Tuffnut look up and wave at her. She waved back, and hoped they couldn't see her face.

...

That afternoon, around the time that they'd been gathering on the lawn by the chief's house while Hiccup sketched his gift for his father, Astrid and Fishlegs met on the path and wandered up the hill together. Sure enough, Hiccup was sitting on the steps, notebook and pencil in hand, and snacks on a wooden tray next to him. The grass was too muddy to sit on, but there was room on the stones for the three of them.

Fishlegs lowered himself to the bottom step with a dramatic sigh - dramatic even for him.

"What's wrong, Fishlegs?" Astrid asked, sitting opposite Hiccup on the stair and leaning against the wooden pillar behind her. The sun was still high enough that it reached the front of the house, and she closed her eyes, watching light and color shift over her eyelids.

"It's Meatlug," he said. "I don't know what to get her for Snoggletog."

Hiccup burst out laughing. "That's months away!"

"I know, but I have to think of something now. If I don't have enough time to makeâ€¦ whatever it isâ€¦ I'll feel awful."

Astrid nodded, her eyes still closed, a smile sneaking across her face. She knew Fishlegs' problem well. Too well.

"What did you get her last year?"

"I made a blanket for her and all her babies, and hid rocks inside so they'd have to dig for them, to strengthen their little baby dragon claws."

Astrid peeked through one eye to see Hiccup biting his lips to keep from laughing.

"That's a good gift," Hiccup said eventually.

"Yeah," Fishlegs said sadly. "I don't want to disappoint her this year with something that's not as good."

"Fishlegs, Meatlug-" Astrid opened her eyes and stopped herself from saying, "is a dragon" by coughing.

Then she continued. "Meatlug is going to like whatever you give her, because it's you, not because of the gift."

She could see Hiccup looking over at her and refused to turn towards him. Her cheeks were beginning to burn, and it wasn't due to the sun.

"I know, butâ€¦thinking of gifts is hard." Fishlegs reached up and took some of the crackers and dried berries on the plate above him.

"It is, but you'll think of something. Like... maybe some new rocks?"

Fishlegs frowned at Astrid, chewing his food. Then he nodded. "That's not a bad idea. I have time to find rocks that she's never tried before between now and Snoggletog."

"You could get a bunch for her, and for the hatchlings."

"You could make toys for the babies, too," Hiccup added.

"Yeah, I could! She'd like that." Fishlegs relaxed with a happy sigh. "Thanks."

"No problem," Astrid said, leaning back and closing her eyes again. Beside her, she heard Hiccup's charcoal scratching against paper and wondered what he was drawing this time. But when curiosity got the best of her and she opened her eyes to look, he'd already turned to a blank page.

"So," he said, glancing over, his half smile teasing her. "How was flying today?"

She growled at him and refused to answer. Her face burned like a Monstrous Nightmare, and that was answer enough.

"Oh - I almost forgot to ask. How'd it go with Tuffnut?" Fishlegs interrupted, his voice eager.

Astrid quietly asked for a small lightning strike or maybe some kind of temporary fog to obscure her face at that moment. No luck. If anything, the light of the sun was probably increasing the redness.

"Good. I'm going to be sore tomorrow, though."

"Yeah, Tuffnut is good but he has no idea how strong he is sometimes," Fishlegs agreed. "Lucky for you, tomorrow is wash day."

Astrid was pretty sure her blush couldn't get any worse. She was

trying not to think about watching Hiccup - about getting _caught_ watching Hiccup - or about how he looked without his shirt, wielding a staff that at times was a blur in his hands.

Then Fishlegs mentioned wash day, and she gave up. Her hair was probably turning red at this point.

Hiccup didn't reply aloud. He must have nodded. Astrid refused to open her eyes and look. If she did, she'd have to kill both of them.

Fishlegs first. He was the one who said, "wash day."

"Well, time for me to head home. I think Hoark is coming to request the handsal tonight."

"He hasn't been yet?" Hiccup sounded surprised. Astrid definitely was.

"No, he said he wanted to wait until after the chief's party."

"Are you turning him away?" Hiccup's voice sounded strange. Astrid opened her eyes and looked at him.

"I don't think so. If Gunnarr turns him away, my mom will kill him and knot an ugly garment out of his hair."

Astrid burst out laughing.

"Does Gunnarr know that?" Hiccup was barely smiling.

"That's what she told him yesterday, and she never lies," Fishlegs answered, standing up. "But I know he's nervous. Hoark, I mean."

Hiccup nodded. Astrid narrowed her eyes. Was he blushing?

Then she turned to Fishlegs. "Are you nervous?"

"Me? No. Well, sort of." He looked up at the roofline for a moment. "I know Hoark makes my mom happy. But Gunnarr, I'm not sure about what he'll say."

"Just have your mom stand in his line of sight, holding her needles. That'll help."

Fishlegs laughed. "Thanks, Astrid. That'll definitely help." Then he wandered off down the hill toward his home.

Astrid took a piece of a cracker, and sat back against the pillar. Hiccup was hunched over his notebook, and his face was most definitely red.

"What are you drawing?"

"Oh, nothing really," he said, in a voice that told her he was drawing something in particular, and that he didn't want to tell her what it was. His face flushed even more.

She tried not to enjoy it, but she did anyway. At least she wasn't

alone.

"Time for me to head home, too. Have more to do before dinner."

He looked over at her. "See you later, then."

She leaned close and kissed his cheek, then stood up. He was frozen in place, eyes wide, his hand holding the charcoal above the paper as he looked at her. Then he smiled again.

She felt him watch her as she made her way down the hill, but she didn't look back. Even though she wanted to, she wouldn't let herself.

If she did, she'd be late getting home.

It wasn't easy.

78. Chapter 78: Running and Waiting

****Running and Waiting****

Washday connected itself seamlessly to the previous day for Hiccup, because he didn't go to sleep. Not for more than an hour or so.

He'd stayed up late working on the drawing that he'd begun in the forge, burning several candles in his room so that he could see. He tried not to feel too guilty about it. His father wouldn't notice and wouldn't have minded either way, but it still seemed somewhat wasteful. The guilt didn't stop him from working, though.

He couldn't work downstairs, or he'd keep his father awake. Stoick, used to dragon raids in the dark of night, was still a very light sleeper. The sound of the charcoal on the page would have woken him and sent him running, probably with axe and hammer in hand, ready to attack the dragon's claws that were scratching through the room in his dream.

So Hiccup worked upstairs, burning candles in curved metal bowls so the light reflected onto the page, and sat at his desk until the night sky out the roof window began to blush a faint pink. He didn't notice the hours going by at all until he stood up, and felt how stiff and sore he was.

He stretched, and looked down at his desk. It was worth it. The image he saw matched what he wanted, what he saw in his mind, and what he'd seen every day that he could. It was exactly right. He was quietly proud of himself.

There wasn't anyone to show it to, though. Toothless was snoring, and he didn't want to wake his father. Stoick had come home late, and gone straight to his chamber, with the sound of snoring following soon afterward.

So Hiccup signed the image using tiny strokes of the charcoal, hiding his signature in a piece of the picture, then blew the dust off the page. He placed another full sheet of paper, a slightly smaller one with a ragged edge, against the front of his work, then rolled it up carefully so it wouldn't smudge.

When he relaxed on his bed and closed his eyes for a moment, he saw the picture again in his mind, and as he fell asleep, he dreamed he flew straight into it, Toothless roaring with him.

...

Hiccup slept for hours instead of a few minutes, and when he woke up, he was disoriented by the angle of the sun, the sounds of the village, and the fact that no one had noticed he had slept almost half the day.

Where was Toothless? He hadn't woken him? Not even to fly?

Alone in his house, Hiccup stumbled down the stairs, ate whatever was left on the side table, and drank almost an entire bucket of water before heading out into the village to find Toothless.

He found his dragon, and all the others, in the academy. Toothless was shooting blasts at targets with Stormfly and the others, helping Fishlegs demonstrate the different kinds of dragon fire to a new group of students.

"Hey, Hiccup," Fishlegs said. "I hope you don't mind that I borrowed Toothless."

Toothless bounced over to Hiccup and demanded attention and neck scratching before going back to his place with the other dragons.

"I don't mind at all, but I'm surprised he hasn't wanted to go flying already."

"Astrid took him out earlier, I think."

"Astrid?"

"Yeah - when you were working."

Hiccup nodded, though he had no idea what Fishlegs was talking about. Had Astrid known he was asleep? Why didn't Toothless wake him up?

With nothing to do aside from his normal chores, he wandered to the forge and worked for a few hours alongside Gobber until Tuffnut came to get him. Practice time.

â€|

Astrid ended her axe practice early that day. She didn't have Stormfly with her, which meant a long walk back to Berk.

It wasn't a good walk. Her thoughts were torturing her, mostly because she was nervous. And tired. She'd stayed up way too late sewing, down by the fire pit after her family had gone to sleep. She was pleased that she'd finally, finally finished her project, but she was tired, and because she was tired, it was easy to fall into a looping circle of worry.

She thought about the ring of metal she'd picked up a few days prior, the piece of Hiccup's prosthetic leg that had been disassembled.

She'd used it for measurement, memorizing where the edges of the metal ring had rested on her palm.

What if the adjustments meant it didn't fit? What if she'd done it wrong?

She shook her head at herself and kept walking. Everything was adjustable. It didn't have to be perfect.

But she wanted it to be. So she worried.

She wasn't as fast as usual, and it took her longer to walk back to Berk through the forest from the clearing. As she walked down the hill behind Hiccup's house, the sun was lower to the sea than the expected. She realized she'd have to run back to the springs to make sure she beat Hiccup.

When she came back down the path at full speed, and realized someone else might be at the springs, she stopped fast, slid across the scattered pine needles and nearly collided with a boulder. So much for stealth. If anyone was at the springs, they would have heard her shriek. They knew someone was coming.

She stood up into silence. Leaning alongside a tree to make sure nothing had fallen out of her bag, Astrid waited. Still silence. Perfect.

She ducked along the boulder that signaled the turn off for the path to the men's springs, and peeked around the side. No one there.

Perfect, again.

She ran toward the rock Hiccup always sat on after his bath and jumped up, left a cloth-wrapped package in the middle, and jumped down. Then she ran toward her hot spring.

Finally. She could hardly wait.

â€|

Hiccup was tired, sore, sweaty and very dirty after battling Tuffnut. Tuff had managed to knock him down, but only once, and Hiccup had returned the favor, so he was altogether pleased with himself.

He walked slowly to the springs, carrying his bag. Tuffnut had declined to go with him, which was fine, though Hiccup probably wouldn't stand too close to Tuff after today, even to practice. Eventually his sister would throw him into some water, and everyone would breathe easier.

Hiccup's back was sore, his arms were heavy, and his right leg was sore where Tuff had struck him, but he didn't mind the aching. Sometimes soreness reminded him of something he'd done wrong, but this was a good soreness, born from something he'd done right.

He was good with a bow and arrow, at anything that involved hitting far targets, really. But close up, he hadn't found a weapon that he could use that wouldn't knock him off balance. Swords, axes, bolas, anything heavy and metal was difficult, because while he had gained

the upper body strength to lift and swing them, the weight at one end made his balance unsteady, and he was more likely to fall, which defeated the purpose of practicing close combat.

A staff, on the other hand, was lighter in weight and enabled him to attack, defend himself, and maintain a boundary that allowed him room to balance and pivot on his leg if he had to, without making himself vulnerable. Tuffnut's berserker heritage had influenced his nonsensical but effective fighting style, and he unintentionally also taught Hiccup how to confuse an opponent while battling. Hiccup didn't think he'd ever talk as much as Tuffnut did, but sparring with someone who wouldn't hesitate to knock him over while telling a joke certainly improved Hiccup's strength and ability.

He made his way to the springs slowly, wondering if he could make a staff out of Gronckle iron, if there were enough pieces of iron left that he could melt them down and make two, one for himself and one for Tuffnut. As much as Tuff liked large, sharp, violent-looking weapons like maces and battle axes, he was very talented with a staff, and a metal one - maybe with a sharpened point at one edge, would be well suited to his fighting style.

Of course, that would mean giving Tuffnut a weapon, which didn't always work out in everyone's favor.

When Hiccup reached the springs, he found that this time, he wasn't alone. Someone had left their clothing on the rock he usually sat on, but when he leaned forward to look, he didn't see anyone in the water. Whoever it was, they'd be back at some point.

He moved the cloth bundle aside and sat down, pulling his shirt off slowly and rubbing the dampness from his skin. He didn't want to get into the water until whoever it was came back. So he waited.

79. Chapter 79: Mistaken Gifts

****Mistaken Gifts****

Astrid pulled off her armor and her clothing, then unbraided her hair. She hadn't been able to stop herself from worrying. What if he didn't like it? What if it didn't fit?

It would fit, she argued with herself, pulling her fingers through her hair to loosen the coils. And if it didn't, she could adjust it.

Still, doubt scurried through her mind and she couldn't catch it, pin it down and lop its head off so it would shut up already.

She slid into the water, and dropped below the surface, rubbing her scalp to loosen her hair. Then she peeked up at the shape of her sea monster. A water funnel, maybe. Or a Gronckle baby.

She swam underwater, turned and went back to the edge, feeling her hair slide through the water against her back.

Astrid broke the surface and looked at the rock edge. Then she cursed herself. She'd forgotten to put her soap near the edge. She'd have to get out and it was going to be really cold.

Then she had an idea. It was about the same time of day that she went to the hot springs, andâ€|.

She swam to the very edge of the pool nearest the path between them, and listened. It sounded like someone was at the other spring, or maybe on the path.

"Hello? Anyone there?"

Silence again. She tried one more time, raising her voice a little louder.

"Hello? Hiccup?"

She was about to pull herself from the water and curse loudly about it when she heard a reply.

"Hang on."

â€|

Hiccup appeared at the end of the path, looking around the cove.

"Astrid?"

"Over here," she said, then rolled her eyes. She was mostly below a rock and he wouldn't see her from where he stood.

"Where -"

"Down here, in the water." She reached over the edge of the rock and pulled her head and shoulders out of the water, folding her arms in front of her on the stone ledge that some of the little kids used as a jumping platform.

When he spotted her, his reaction was almost comical. His eyes widened, and a wave of dark red swept over his face past his ears. His scalp was probably red, too. He blinked and took a step back, running into the rock wall beside him, and nearly falling over.

"I forgot my soap. It's in my bag," she said, pointing. "Can you toss it to me?"

Her arms rested on the rock edge, and she knew only her shoulders and head were visible. The rest of her was in the water. His reaction seemed a bitâ€| odd.

Of course, she'd had to shut her eyes and mentally smack herself when she was watching him battle Tuffnut, so she supposed he had reason to be a little unsettled.

He went over to her pack, found her soap and tossed it to her into the water, keeping his eyes down, averted from her. She caught it easily.

Then he turned away. The back of his neck was as red as his face.

"Thank you!"

She had to raise her voice, he was moving so quickly. He waved to her over his shoulder with one arm and practically ran down the path.

She frowned, and started lathering the soap in her hands.

â€|

Hiccup gave up caring if anyone came back for their clothing or if the entire village visited the spring while he was in it. He removed his shirt again, tossed it aside, then pulled off the rest of his clothing and his leg, and threw himself into the water.

He stayed beneath the surface until his chest burned, then surfaced for a moment to take a deep breath. Then he went under again where no one could see him.

Eventually his heart stopped racing and trying to jump through his ribs, and the heat of the water insured that the skin on the rest of his body was probably the same deep red as his face. He swam to a low rock beneath the surface and sat down, breathing fast.

He'd been hiding his reaction to Astrid for years. He'd learned long ago to keep his face from betraying how he felt, and even though he turned red easily, he knew his expression didn't reveal too much. Or so he thought, since no one teased him or joked about it.

But he was not able to hide his reaction to seeing Astrid pull herself out the hot springs, her hair slicked back from her face, her arms-

He needed to stop thinking about it. Immediately. Or he'd never be able to leave the water.

The image was difficult to erase from his mind, like the memory of Astrid without her armor. He tried anyway as he washed his hair, first distracting himself with bubbles from the soap he'd brought, and then challenging himself to devise a weapon for Tuffnut that wouldn't hurt anyone unintentionally.

Eventually, he had to give up. The more he tried not to think about it, the more the image remained in his mind.

Hiccup rinsed his hair and his skin, then pulled himself out of the water. He dried off with a cloth and pulled on clean leggings, staring at the water.

The folded pile of cloth was still on the rock. He glanced at it, then looked at the water again. Whoever it was that left their clothes, he could bring them to the great hall later, when he walked home.

Maybe if he sketched what he'd seen. Maybe that would help.

He'd have to be careful with his sketchbook, but generally he was.

So he opened to a blank page and started to draw.

â€|

Astrid finished bathing, unsure if she should move slower, or faster than usual. She wanted to talk with Hiccup like she usually did, then walk back to Berk with him, but he looked so miserable when he'd run out of the cove away from her.

He had to have found her gift by now. And he should be done in the springs, but if she showed up while he was in the water, she wasn't sure what he'd do. Drown himself, maybe?

She shook her head. Sometimes, he made no sense to her.

She coiled her hair into a knot, gathered up her things and made her way down the path, scuffing her feet so he would know she was close.

She needn't have worried. He was on his rock, hunched over his sketchbook, drawing something so intently, he didn't hear her approaching. When she dropped her bag on the ground and her armor made a low clanking sound against the boulder, he jumped and spun around halfway.

"Astrid! Uh, hi."

He was still being weird. His face was bright red, and he closed his notebook but kept it over his lap. His grip on his charcoal was turning his knuckles white - which was very strange, since he usually held it too lightly, sometimes dropping it without meaning to.

She narrowed her eyes.

Her gift was unopened, on the rock behind him.

Did he notâ€|?

Great.

More confusion.

She picked up her comb and jumped up next to him. He moved over to make space for her as he always did, but didn't say anything.

His notebook was turned to a blank page, but she'd seen him drawing when she walked up. He was hiding his sketches.

She started unrolling her hair, squeezing some of the water out, and picked up her comb.

Why hadn't he opened his gift?

She was about to ask him when he turned to her.

"Did you stop by your house before you came here?"

That was an odd question. "No. I left my bag at the stables this morning so I didn't have to walk all the way to my house."

Hiccup nodded.

What was going on? Why was the weirdness back?

"Besides," she continued. "If I go home, Sigrid will come up with six things for me to do to help her. I try to stay out of her sight when she's cooking."

"Hasn't given up?"

"Nope," she answered. Her aunt was determined to teach Astrid to cook. Everyone else, including Astrid, knew this was a losing cause, but Sigrid kept trying.

Hiccup shook his head, watching her comb her hair for a moment before he turned his face toward the blank page of his notebook.

Astrid dealt with a small snarl before she spoke again.

"How come you haven't opened your gift?"

She tried to sound nonchalant. She failed.

"My gift?" He looked confused.

"Hiccup. Next to you. Wrapped and tied with string. The way a gift usually is?"

"Wait, this? This isâ€¦from you?" He turned to his other side to grab the parcel she'd left. She tried not to watch the muscles of his abdomen flex as he reached, but when she looked elsewhere, she found she was staring at the freckles of his shoulders, which was just as distracting.

"Yes," she said, clearing her throat. "That."

He started to laugh. "I had no idea this was from you. I thought someone had left their clothes behind."

"No," she glared at him for a moment. All that worry that he hadn't liked it, and he hadn't even opened it.

Which meant - oh, gods.

He untied the string and unfolded the cloth she'd wrapped around it, and her heart started running in place, thumping so wildly she thought he would feel the vibrations.

She watched his hands, not his face, as he looked at, then lifted the leather from the fabric wrapping. The outside was still smooth, she noted. The stitches hadn't pulled or crimped, and the fabric and the small amount of stuffing inside didn't seem to have shifted in her bag.

But Hiccup didn't say anything, and the fear that he didn't like it made her speak.

"It's for-"

"-my leg," he finished in a quiet voice.

She cleared her throat again. Her heart had given up running and was trying to launch itself upward, and she had to swallow twice before she could speak again.

"I know you have to wait until your skin is dry to go home, and I thought it would be safer for you, more comfortable, if you ever had to run home in a hurry."

She trailed off. She still hadn't looked at his face, and she made herself do so now.

He was staring at her, and she couldn't read his expression. Was he upset? Was he angry or embarrassed? His eyes were wide, and a faint blush began to spread across his cheeks, but his eyebrows weren't pinched and he didn't look mad.

But he didn't look happy, either.

"I'm sor-"

Her words were cut off when he reached over, slid his fingers into her hair, pulled her towards him, and kissed her. Deeply. Like he didn't intend to stop. Ever.

The comb dropped from her hand, and she reached for him. He must have put the cuff aside because he grabbed her and lifted her onto his lap, pulling her body against his, without removing his lips from hers.

His kiss was desperation and gentleness mixed together, sending fire across her skin. She put her hands on his chest, and they must have been warm from the springs because he didn't flinch away from her. He wrapped one arm around her and pressed her close against him, his other hand still in her hair. He feasted on her mouth, as she ran her hand over his shoulder, feeling the curve of muscles she'd watched from afar flex beneath her fingers. She did it again as she slid her other hand into his hair, feeling the softness of it as he slowly moved away, catching his breath.

She leaned her forehead against his, watching as he opened his eyes. He couldn't look away, and, much like after he'd woken up after the Great Battle, she knew that if she could see his eyes clearly, she'd know if he was all right.

She frowned and moved away slightly so she could see him better. For a moment, it looked like he had tears in his eyes, but he blinked, and if they'd been there, they were gone.

"Thank you," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. His fingertips stroked down her neck, and she tried her best not to shiver, though his touch always sent needles of fire flying under her skin.

"You're welcome," she said. "I was worried"

He raised his eyebrows, still watching her eyes, their faces close enough that all they could see was one another.

"I was worried you didn't like it, or that it wouldn't fit - wait.

You have to try it on."

She scrambled off his lap but sat close to him, facing him with their legs touching, as he reached over and picked up the cuff from the stone next to him.

"It adjusts," she added, as he slid the cuff over his leg. The sides and base were leather, stitched together to cover the end of his leg, lined with the softest fabric she could find, with padding between them. It fit perfectly, as far as she could tell, and she sighed with relief.

He glanced at her with a smile, then adjusted the cuff, turning it slightly one way, and then the other.

"I can't feel the seams of the fabric at all," he said.

"That was my goal - the stuffing should obscure them enough so you don't feel them, but if you do, please give it to me so I can fix it for you."

He nodded, then reached for his prosthetic. Astrid's worry returned. What if, when Gobber and Hiccup had adjusted the fit, they changed the measurements so much that it didn't work?

But he fit the top of his prosthetic against the leather, turned the ring of metal at the top to the left, and it slid over the cuff perfectly.

"Amazing," he said.

Astrid picked up her comb and began pulling the snarls from her hair to give her hands something to do other than fidget. "It fits?"

He nodded, adjusting the top of his prosthetic. Then he turned and jumped off the rock, landing on his feet, both of them. He walked around, testing it, then turned to her with a smile.

She grinned back, sliding the comb through her hair as he moved around the clearing, his stride unimpeded and normal, as far as she could tell.

Hiccup came back to the rock and jumped onto it, pulling himself over to her with his arms and sitting in the same spot, next to her, but facing her as she worked on her hair.

Astrid froze when Hiccup gently touched her face with his hands. He moved closer so he was looking directly at her, and she couldn't see anything else.

"Thank you, Astrid."

His eyes, green like the pine forest, were so close and so clear, she understood what he meant. He wasn't just talking about the cuff, but about all of it. Everything.

He leaned forward a tiny amount, and Astrid thought for an infinite moment that he might kiss her.

When he didn't, without thinking about it first, she reached over,

tucked her hand behind his neck gently, and brought his mouth to hers.

She didn't climb onto his lap again, but when her tongue moved over his, she moved closer to him so she could feel more of his skin beneath her hands, more of his strength against her own.

When they moved apart again, she smiled at him.

"You're welcome."

80. Chapter 80: Combing Through Memories

Combing Through Memories

Hiccup picked up his notebook, which had fallen behind him at some point, not that he had noticed, while Astrid finished combing out her hair and began braiding it.

But he didn't start sketching. He looked at the blank page for enough time to register that it was blank, then watched Astrid braid her hair instead. It still wasn't any easier to watch her, but he couldn't look away.

"What?"

His mouth curved into half a smile, but he kept watching her. "I don't have to wait for my skin to dry now, but I don't want to hurry."

"I don't want you to hurry," she said, holding her braid with one hand and reaching over to push a damp lock of his hair back from his forehead. "But I don't want you to hurt, either."

He had absolutely no idea what to say. There weren't any words that fit. Every word he knew was too small, insufficient to explain what he was thinking, how he felt.

Astrid down looked at her hair as she finished braiding it, bringing the length of it over her shoulder. "I know that it'll be your job to take care of everyone, when you're chief."

"I don't mind that part," he said with a frown.

She continued as if he hadn't spoken. "So Iâ€¦ wanted to take care of you."

Again, every word he knew wasn't enough.

Eventually, he said, quietly, his chest on fire and his heart pounding, "I don't mind that part, either."

She smiled up at him, a gentle, open smile he'd remember for the rest of his life.

She didn't move to get up or jump down from the rock when she tied off the plait on her shoulder. He wasn't ready to leave yet, either, though he was getting hungry. So they sat for a moment, enjoying the warmth and the quiet.

"Thank you for flying with Toothless today."

"Oh, you're welcome. I flew by your window when I saw Toothless sitting by your house."

"Was he pouting?"

"Definitely," she said, laughing. "I saw you were sleeping so I landed and asked if I could take him up. He practically threw me onto his back and took off right there."

Hiccup shook his head. "I feel bad. He can be very demanding. Thank you."

She shrugged. "No worries. Stormfly flew with us, so it was fun."

She looked down at his notebook, and her eyes narrowed.

"What were you drawing? Earlier?"

"Oh, gods," he mumbled.

...

Hiccup's face flushed so deep, and so quickly, that if he didn't tell her, she'd tickle him until he relented. Whatever it was, if it made his face that red, that embarrassed, she had to know. Immediately.

"Hiccup," she said, a warning in her voice.

He looked up at the sky for a moment, but held his notebook out of reach when she tried to grab it.

"I have to explain before I show you," he said.

She folded her hands in what should have looked like patience and waited for him to speak. He glanced at her hands nervously.

"When I have an image or... an idea stuck in my head, sometimes it helps to draw it, or sketch versions of it, so I can stop thinking about it all the time."

"You've told me this before."

"I know. So I couldn't... get this out of my head and I tried to draw it. I didn't do a very good job, though."

He handed her his notebook, still open to the blank page. She took it and turned one page over.

She saw herself. From the springs.

Her hair was slicked back and her arms were folded, her eyes peeking over her arms. She could tell she was smiling from the lines near her eyes, and because she remembered smiling at him, hiding her laugh behind her arms. He'd drawn the rocks around her, the water behind her, but the focus was her eyes. They looked amused

andâ€|magical.

She didn't look like herself. She looked ethereal, mischievous and beautiful, and she'd had no idea he saw her that way at all.

She looked up at Hiccup, shocked.

"I'm sorry, I know - I shouldn't have - I'd never show it to anyone. I'll burn it, just give-

"No," she said, holding the notebook out of his reach. "Youâ€|you would burn this?"

He looked miserable. "If a drawing isn't very good, or I don't want anyone to see it, yeah, I burn it. Iâ€|. I'm sorry. I should have-

"You had to draw me to get this image out of your head?"

"Well, yeah." He didn't look at her, but he gestured with his arms, still holding his charcoal tight in his hand. "I needed to breathe, and, you know, not walk into trees and rocks on the way home."

She started to laugh, quietly at first, then so loudly she had to cover her mouth with one hand and struggle to keep herself sitting upright.

"I'm glad you think it's funny," he said, sounding confused.

"Oh, Hiccup," she sighed. "I thought - well, never mind what I thought."

She shook her head at him, and handed his notebook back, leaving the page open to the drawing of her. He closed it quickly, and looked away, putting it next to his clothing.

She reached over and turned his face toward her, but he still looked down. So she lowered her face until she caught his attention. "I'm not mad."

"You probably should be," he muttered.

"I don't think so. That wasâ€|that was for you, right?"

"Gods, yes, of course."

"Ok, then."

He closed his eyes, his face still burning red, and she leaned back on her arms, watching him, wondering, if she could draw as well as he did, how she'd sketch him.

She knew the answer almost immediately. She'd sketch him in the clearing, fighting with a staff, his shirt off, the sun on his skin.

She smiled thinking about it.

...

When the wind ruffled Hiccup's hair, he sat up straighter and turned to Astrid, opening his eyes.

"Can I borrow your comb?"

"Sure," she said, but she didn't hand it over. "Why?"

"I forgot mine, and my hair's getting too long. I should comb it when it's drying," he replied.

Astrid's grin widened, her mouth shifting into a wicked curve that made him want to simultaneously laugh and move away from her quickly. "My turn," she said.

She moved to sit behind him, and carefully began combing his hair, making sure she didn't pull when she found a snarl.

"I think there's a bonfire tonight," she said, her breath warm on his shoulder. He tried not to fixate on the sensation of it. Or on how the feeling of her fingers in his hair, the pull of the comb, and the warmth of her sitting so close to him made him feel as if he were dissolving inside.

"There is," he said, when he thought he could speak normally. "Tuffnut's in charge again."

"Burnt food! Excellent."

He laughed as her comb swept through the rest of his hair. She must have found another tangle, because he felt her gently pulling the hair at the nape of his neck.

"You know I'll share my food with you," he said.

"How do you do that, cook the fish so it never burns?" She must have moved closer, because he felt more of the warmth of her against his back.

"I'll show you. It's easy."

"For you, maybe. Not for me."

"Hey, I couldn't make this if my life depended on it," he said, gesturing to the cuff he still wore. He kept touching it, feeling the edges and the sides.

It was amazing.

The outside was one curve of leather, wrapped in a circle and sewn on one edge, then connected to a piece of thicker leather on the bottom. The lining was soft, and the padding kept the seams from pressing against his skin. It was soft and comfortable, even when he stood. Even though his skin was still slightly damp, he could put on his prosthetic and walk with no pressure, no irritation or pain at all.

The fact that she'd made this for him - he stopped, held his breath as different memories fell into place. She'd asked to borrow his leg - to measure it. Her conversation with Gobber about joining leather to fabric, all of that was to make this for him. She must have been

working on this for weeks.

He still lacked sufficient words to communicate how that made him feel. But he was distracted from trying to find some when Astrid leaned forward, kissed the side of his neck, then ran the edge of her teeth along his shoulder. He didn't have words for that either.

She moved forward and sat beside him. "All done."

He ran his fingers through his hair, pushing it back from his face, and his fingers caught on something. He froze.

"What is that?"

"A braid," she replied, a hesitant but happy smile on her face.

"You braided my hair?" She hadn't found a tangle. He ran his fingers along the length of it. A small, thin braid, about as long as his finger, hung beneath the hair below his ear.

"Yup, I did," she said. Then her smile faded. "You don't have to keep it if you don't like it."

He wasn't sure if he did like it, but he'd never tell her so, not if it made the smile leave her face. He put his hand down and shook his head at her ruefully. Her smile returned.

"Ready to go?"

She leaned over and kissed him, just once, briefly, still smiling. Then she nodded.

They climbed off the rock together, and headed back to Berk.

81. Chapter 81: A Peaceful Embrace

****A Peaceful Embrace****

Dinner at the bonfire was exactly as Hiccup had expected: large, loud, warm, and, since Hiccup cooked for them both, very satisfying. Tuffnut demanded that Hiccup demonstrate their sparring techniques, but Hiccup declined, saying it would be a waste of a good cooking spear, and an even better fish. Ruffnut teased her brother into fighting with her, but they stopped when Tuffnut became concerned for the safety of his fire. Their safety, of course, was secondary to protecting the blaze that reached higher than two vikings.

Snotlout sat next to Ruffnut, but he was quiet, watching mostly, an almost pained look on his face. Hiccup wasn't sure what was wrong, but he didn't ask.

Astrid sat next to him, eating the last of their fish, talking to Fishlegs about the handsal.

"Gunnarr didn't turn him away, probably because my mom increased her threats. He wanted to, butâ€¦ well, he's scared of her."

"He's a wise man," Hiccup said, laughing.

"Hoark was really generous, though," Fishlegs said. "He offered more than Gunnarr expected, and he couldn't say no even if he'd wanted to."

"Did your mom stand where Gunnarr could see him?"

"No, she stayed upstairs, but we could hear her knotting and sewing. It made Gunnarr plenty nervous," Fishlegs said with a laugh. "He was sweating the entire time."

"So when's the wedding?" Astrid asked as she licked her fingers.

"Probably this fall," Fishlegs said. "Hoark is going to talk to Stoick."

Hiccup nodded, warm from the fire, from laughing with his friends, and from the fact that Astrid was next to him again, sharing his food.

A short while later, they left together, and no one said a word about it. It was so unremarkable to everyone at the fire that they said goodnight and nothing else.

Hiccup shook his head as they went down the stairs. He'd been worried about what they'd say, figuring at some point someone would tease him or say something stupid.

He'd never expected there'd be no reaction at all.

Astrid skipped ahead, and waited for him at the bottom.

Then she punched him in the arm.

"Ow! What in Thor's name was that for?"

"Thank you for the drawing," she answered.

He looked at her, rubbing his arm, confused- as usual. He'd been wondering if she'd found it, and apparently she had, since she was upset about it. He'd had Stormfly drop it into the window of her room, and she must have discovered it before meeting him at the bonfire.

But he had no idea why she was angry.

He'd drawn Berk from above, the way it had looked the first time they'd flown together. He'd added all the newer buildings, the ones that had been built since that time, and drawn the dragons hiding in and around each of them. Stormfly was peeking from behind Astrid's house, and the baby Nadders Stormfly loved were hanging from her quills and dancing on the roof.

He'd thought she'd like it, but if she was hitting him.

Then she reached up and kissed him, the instant fire of her mouth on his erasing any other sensation.

"It's beautiful," she whispered after a moment.

He nodded, relieved.

"Thank you," she said again. "I almost didn't go to the bonfire. I wanted to sit and look at it for hours."

She took his hand, and they walked slowly away from the fire, but not towards their homes.

"Can we walk a bit?"

Hiccup shrugged, but nodded. If people were looking for them, they'd assume they were at the bonfire, so as long as they didn't walk for the rest of the night, it shouldn't raise any alarms.

As they headed toward the path along the cliffs, Astrid turned to him.

"How did you draw that? Were you on Toothless with that huge sheet of paper?"

He laughed. "No, but I did a lot of small sketches while I was flying."

"Oh - that's what you were doing with Eira."

"Eira?" He frowned. "Oh! Sort of. I'd done most of my sketching by then, but she was helping me count all the buildings so I didn't forget one."

"So wait, is that where Toothless was, in your drawing for your dad?"

"In the sky?"

"Yeah."

"No, that's not where he is," Hiccup replied with a grin.

She glared at him, so he explained.

"Toothless isn't in my dad's drawing. He was never there. He's in yours."

She looked confused. He tried really hard not to enjoy that look for a moment since she so often completely baffled him. Then her face cleared as she understood.

"He's the border. The lower border."

Hiccup nodded. "His ears are the lower border, and you and I are in there, too. That's... our view of Berk."

Astrid squeezed his hand. "Thank you."

He grinned in reply.

"How'd you sneak into my room?"

Hiccup frowned. "I didn't."

"How did you get the drawing onto my bed, then?"

"Stormfly. She tossed it through the window for me."

"She did?"

He nodded.

"You've been talking to my dragon?"

"Only fair, since you scheme and plot with mine," he replied, smiling at her.

She glared at him, her lips twitching at the corner as she bit down on her smile.

â€

Astrid drew back her fist slowly, and he saw her. He blocked her punch with his hand, and Astrid realized again how strong he'd become. She looked at his hand holding her fist.

Then she looked up to his face. She'd grown used to his being slightly taller than her, though it had taken awhile.

"Is this how we really hold hands?"

"I hope not," he replied with a grin, and let her go.

She drew back, and he ducked to the side, awaiting another punch to the arm.

But she didn't punch him. She reached up with her other hand, the hand he didn't see coming, grabbed his neck and brought his mouth to hers.

She'd meant to kiss him quickly, but as usual, once she began, she never wanted to stop.

They broke apart, breathing faster, and after a moment continued their walk. She slipped her hand back into his, and held on.

"I don't get it, though," he said. "Why are you upset?"

"Upset?"

"Yeah, usually if I give you something, you don't... attack me."

"You don't like when I kiss you?"

He looked down at her, glaring slightly. She grinned, and his attempt at a stern expression broke into pieces as he laughed.

"Seriously. Did I make you angry? I'm sorry for sneaking something into your room," he continued.

"No, no - that's not it. I'm not mad about that at all. I'm kind of disappointed it wasn't you personally."

He laughed again. "There is no way I could do that. Not a chance."

"My window does face most of the village," she agreed. "You're the one with the view of the sea."

They were taking the longer path along the eastern cliffs, both of them turning that way automatically. They weren't walking very fast, and had no destination in mind. The time to walk together was what they most wanted.

"So what upset you?" He clearly wasn't going to let this go, so she took a deep breath and told him the truth.

"You're one up on me."

"I am? How?"

"You've given me more than I've given you." It was a little embarrassing to say that out loud. It made a lot more sense in her head.

"No way."

"Yeah, you have."

Hiccup gestured with his free hand, a look of bafflement on his face. "How can you think that?"

"Because it's true. You've given me so many things, and I have to catch up to you."

Hiccup shook his head at her.

"That isn't true, Astrid. You snuck into my room in the middle of the day when I was sick." Hiccup frowned. "I'm pretty sure you did, anyway."

"Yeah, I did. With Lofn and Odin--"

Hiccup elbowed her in the ribs and she laughed.

"And you visited me when my father was sick, to make sure I had someone to talk to that wasn't my dad. And you were the only one aside from Gobber who knew how sick he was. With that and... everything else, we're even."

"But I didn't give you anything. I didn't bring anything to you. I was in your room for, what, ten minutes?"

"Still counts."

"No. No, it doesn't."

"Yes. Astrid, it counts. It all counts."

They stopped at the point where the path turned away from Berk. She could see the bonfires in the distance, but at that moment, it was just the two of them, with the forest standing beside them and the

sea crashing into the cliffs below.

...

Hiccup turned to face her, agitation in his posture, in the pinch of his eyebrows, and in the movement of his hands. "I could never give you anything that would match what you've given me."

"What, you mean the cuff? Or the pillow?"

"No. Yes, butâ€¦."

He was silent for so long, she thought he forgotten what he'd been saying. She stood facing him, watching over his shoulder as muted colors spread across the water beneath the fading sunlight. Then she grew impatient and looked up at him.

"Hiccup, what are you talking about?"

"You." Hiccup gestured at the ground, his hand moving through the space between them. "Here."

"What?"

"You, here. With me. That's it."

"I'm with you nearly every day, Hiccup."

"That's not what I mean." He shook his head, frowning, and turned toward the ocean. Astrid waited, giving him space to locate the words he wanted to use, knowing that this time, she couldn't prod him to speak until he found them. After a long moment, he sighed again, a defeated sound.

"Your being here. You standing right there, here, with me, is the best gift you could ever give me."

Astrid stared at him, still confused. He put his hands in his hair and pulled at it a little, his fingers catching on his braid.

"You... you were always around, we were always around each other, but then, after Toothless, after..."

He stopped and started again.

"Youâ€¦ you were with me. You were first. I was so used to being on my own, and then I'd turn around and you were there. You were there for all of it. Whenever something happens, something good or somethingâ€¦ I look for you. I look around to see if you're there. And you are. Every time. And you're here now."

She couldn't move. He turned to face her and thought her heart might shatter from the look on his face.

"I'm still amazed every moment you stand next to me, and I'm amazed that you stay there. It's the best gift you could ever give me."

Astrid didn't know what to say. She was afraid to say anything. She

felt like she'd been turned inside out, and all she had to do was listen.

Hiccup faced the water again, his hands on his head, pulling on his hair a little as he looked out to the horizon. He drew a deep breath, like he was about to jump off the cliff edge. Astrid started to grab his arm, in case he was about to do something crazy, but then he spoke again.

"Iâ€¦ I like when you're with me. I alwaysâ€¦ want you with me."

"Ok," Astrid said. That wasn't a problem.

But Hiccup wasn't finished.

"No, I mean, all the time. I want to see you first before I see the sunrise, and I want to know you're with me when I'm sleeping. I want you beside me to ask questions and I want to know that if I get lost, you'll be with me to find our way back."

She couldn't breathe.

"I want to ask you all the questions I ask myself. I want to reach out and know you're there. I miss you when you're not with me. I imagine you sitting on my bed, talking with me at night, all the time - which is crazy, I know. This past winter, we were apart more than we were together, and Iâ€¦ I want it the other way around."

She slid closer, ducked her head under his arm, and put her arms around him.

"Hiccup. I said, 'Ok.'"

She rested her head on his shoulder, and felt his arms slowly, slowly come down to fold around her, bringing her closer. His other hand followed, sliding over her arm, which was wrapped around his waist. She could feel his heartbeat beneath her cheek. A huge breath left his body. His arms tightened around her and he rested his head on hers.

"I can't not you," Hiccup said quietly.

"I can't not you either," Astrid said. Then she looked up and he closed the distance between them, kissing her with scorching gentleness.

"Thank you," he whispered against her lips.

"Always," she said. Then she smiled at him, almost laughed aloud as a thought flew through her mind. She moved to kiss him again, but he moved away.

"What?"

She kissed him anyway, reaching up to pull him towards her, then smiled up at him again.

"I'll hide all my mother's axes," she said. "And Sigrid's knives."

He laughed, loud and long, joy evident in his expression.

"I love you, you know," she said, fearless.

His arms tightened around her and he froze. He stared at her, looking at her face intently, as if he were memorizing what she looked like at that moment.

"Iâ€|didn't," he said slowly. "I mean, Iâ€| I didn't know -"

"I do," she interrupted him, feeling the warmth of being in his arms spread through her. "Love you, I mean."

He looked into her eyes, and she saw so much of what he didn't say. Then he drew a slow breath.

"I have loved you for more than half my life."

Her smile grew as tears began to sting. He leaned down, looking into her eyes, his voice barely a whisper.

"And I will love you for the rest of it, too."

Then he kissed her, and if time stopped for awhile, she didn't notice, or care.

The light from the sun was gone, and the edge of the sea was impossible to distinguish from the edge of the sky. They stood for a long time, together on the cliff edge, looking out at the water until the pounding in their chests settled into the peaceful rhythm of the sea.

The End

* * *

><p>Thank you to everyone who reviewed and liked and followed this story. This was the first fic I've written, and I was hugely nervous about sharing it with people. Thank you so much for the encouragement and the compliment - they meant everything.

_I'm guessing some of you are screaming at their screens that this story is over. But yes, it's true. This is the end. I've been pondering writing the next part (more, ahem, detailed and physical, perhaps) of their relationship, so if I do, I will post it on . I promise. _

Thank you again - you are all wonderful. Merci.

End
file.